

# Western Living, Western Homes

In 1950, *Western Homes and Living*, a new publication devoted to life on the west coast, identified a regional Pacific Coast style in current house design distinct from the international style and popular historical modes. This particularly west-coast approach was characterized by its extensive glazing, including walls of glass, and the use of flat roofs, cedar siding, and flagstones for floors and fireplaces.<sup>1</sup> Such designs illustrated the magazine's premise that "British Columbia living is of a different kind ... a Far West quality related to the entirely different geography and climate of this province."<sup>2</sup>

In 1951, the Massey Royal Commission published its assessment of architecture in Canada. The conclusions were based upon a study initiated in 1949. During this two year period the researchers had noted these developments in the west and had "watched with interest the emergence of those regional characteristics."<sup>3</sup> The report also lamented the absence of these characteristics elsewhere in Canada. To the Massey Commission these west coast residences were exemplary for Canada as a whole because of their regional identification.

In 1952, two west coast houses were the recipients of Massey Medals established by the Massey Commission: the Porter house of 1948-49 by John Porter and the Copp house of 1950-51 by Ron Thom (then of Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt) (figures 1 and 2). Both received silver medals. Editorials and announcements explained this achievement by reference to their modern construction and highlighted their regional characteristics of timber structure, openness of plan, accessibility to the out-of-doors, and general informality. However, modern shed roofs, wood siding, extensive glazing, and terraces incorporated as outdoor extensions of indoor living spaces could also be found in Toronto and Edmonton at this time.<sup>4</sup> How did these characteristics come to be identified with a regional Pacific Coast style? The answer to this question is the object of this study.

The formulation of this distinctive style begins in the immediate prewar years and the discussion surrounding modern architecture in Canada. Modernism, as identified with the International Style, had been much debated in the popular and professional presses in the 1930s. The dominant criticism was that this style, with its flat roofs and large expanses of glass, was inappropriate for the climate, the topographical variations, and the resulting wide range of environmental controls needed in Canada.<sup>5</sup>

Implied in this criticism was a lack of regional expression. The aspect of modernism that was seen as applicable was its emphasis on functionalism. It is at this time that "regional" begins to emerge as an alternative to "modern" as a positive evaluative term. One of the first to consider the questions of modern and regional as they pertained to west coast architecture was B.C. Binning, an artist interested in architecture and the all-encompassing notion of modern design. His teaching at the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Design emphasized this inclusive view of design. He would, in the 1940s, become involved in the "Art in Living Group," the newly-founded School Architecture, and the Fine Arts Department at the University of British Columbia.

Binning's interest in architectural design dated from the late 1930s. In 1937 he had left for study in Europe, disappointed in his endeavours to find an appropriately modern house in the west at a time when Cape Cod, Colonial or Georgian styles were considered apt. Between this assessment and the 1952 Massey Commission's recognition of the unique style achieved in domestic architecture on the west coast lies an intriguing but meaningful 15 years. To begin to understand both Binning's discouragement and the Massey Commission's satisfaction we must try to define what was meant by *west coast* and *west coast living*.

Notions of west coast living at the beginning of this period might best be symbolized by the very different images proposed in the 1939 Golden Gate Exposition murals by Orville Fischer and Paul Goranson, and J.W.G. Macdonald's mural for the Hotel Vancouver of the same year.<sup>6</sup> The subject matter of the former was Vancouver's city centre and docks. It

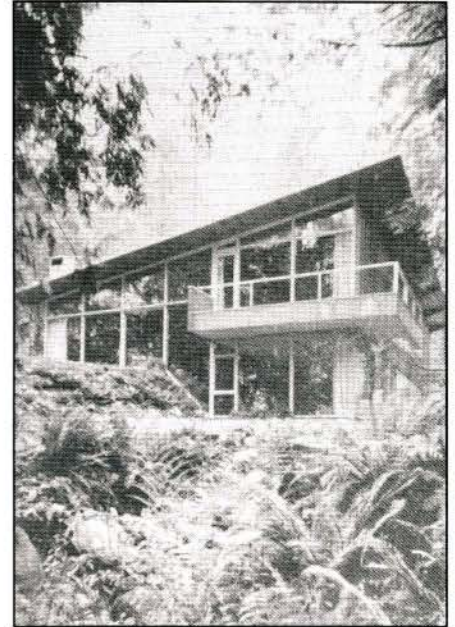


Figure 1. Porter house by John Porter, 1948-49. View to garden. (JRAIC [January 1953])

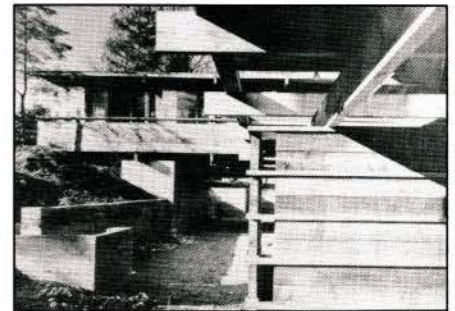


Figure 2. Copp house by Ron Thom (of Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt), 1950. View to entrance. (JRAIC [January 1953])

by Sherry McKay

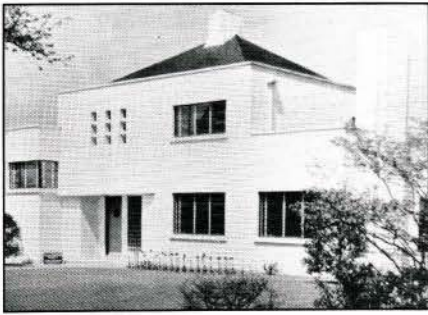


Figure 3. Crosby house by R.A.D. Berwick, 1939. Distant view. (JRAIC [May 1939])



Figure 4. Willoughby house by R.A.D. Berwick, 1939. Distant view. (JRAIC [May 1939])



Figure 5. Thornton-Runge house by Peter Thornton, 1939. (JRAIC [June 1947])

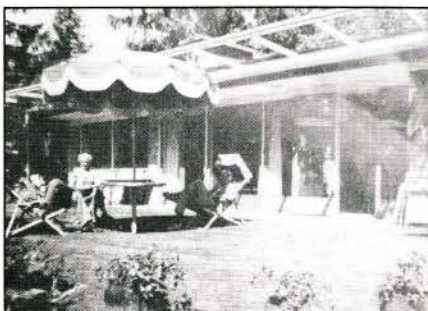


Figure 6. Binning house by B.C. Binning, 1939. Garden elevation. (Western Homes and Living [October/November 1950])

presented a west coast which was industrialized, inhabited by workers and skyscrapers, dominated by the modern metropolis. The subject of the latter was a native Indian village protected by totem poles and engulfed by trees. It offered an alternative view, a west coast which was nature-bound, formed by families and houses, dominated by life sheltered within a primeval forest of filtered natural light. These two contemporaneous views of western living stood in intriguing juxtaposition, two unfused visions of the same scene: one celebrated the skyscraper, the other the home.

In 1939, such opposing perceptions of the west could be found illustrated architecturally by the Crosby house, captioned as “Sane Modern,” and the Willoughby house, characterized as “colonial cottage,” in *Canadian Homes and Gardens*.<sup>7</sup> The Crosby House was an asymmetrical composition of white planes bereft of any applied ornament (figure 3). It was constructed of rendered concrete block according to sound functional planning. It suggested the rational theory purported by modernism. The Willoughby house consisted of a spreading single-storey structure with low gabled roof, beveled cedar siding, and historical (“familiar”) details of multi-paned bow windows and green shutters against white walls (figure 4). The “colonial cottage” reference, although appended to a modernized plan and construction, implied a romantic theory whereby the choice of style is based on the appropriateness of the associations evoked by means of form and detail. A “colonial cottage” style denoted a recently-settled rugged coastal location, and was therefore considered apt for Vancouver, which shared the climate, topography, and materials of the original model. In the succeeding period, the synthesis of modern industry and romantic nature would be essayed in architecture. The process would be modern, the venue the home.

Three houses contend for the honour of being the first built on the west coast according to a modern process. They are the B.C. Binning, R.A.D. Berwick, and P. Thornton houses, all built between 1939 and 1940. However, perhaps the first professionally-designed house given *national* recognition as “modern in the Far West” is the 1939 house designed by Peter Thornton in semi-rural Caulfield, near West Vancouver.<sup>8</sup> It is a rectangular, flat-roofed structure of timber and cobblestone (figure 5). It turns from the street toward the view and sun, its interior space extending to an exterior terrace via sliding glass doors. Thornton had just returned from England and this influence is evident in the white-painted rectangular form, the Corbusian staircase, and the sculptural landscape of curving garden walls and asymmetrically-placed plantings.<sup>9</sup> Despite its timber, cobblestones, and local materials, contemporary discussions of the house emphasized its modern, rational approach to climate, site, materials, and plan rather than its regional expressiveness.

European modernism was also the starting point for B.C. Binning’s answer to the question of an architecture suitable for the west coast. In 1939 he had noted the emergence of new precedents overseas:

In Europe then a move was afoot to develop an entirely new kind of architecture. An architecture that exploited honestly all the attractive properties of glass, steel, and concrete, the building materials of the day.<sup>10</sup>

It was his intention, however, to re-interpret this modernism in terms of west coast living:

If European architects were developing a new architecture with their local building materials why shouldn’t he design a new style of B.C. house with B.C. building materials.<sup>11</sup>

Binning thus sought to fuse modern tenets of abstract and rational design with a regionalist sensitivity to materials (figure 6). The house he built in response to his agenda was seminal. It was to this house that young architects made pilgrimage, that a coterie of artists and future architects, Ron Thom and Arthur Erickson among them, were attracted, that Richard Neutra was brought, that the president of the University of British Columbia and other faculty were invited, and to this house that searchers of images of distinctively modern house design constantly returned. It served just such an iconic function in the 1945 *Art and Living* exhibition.<sup>12</sup> It became a rallying point for a new way of living, a new way of designing, and a new way of architecturally representing the west coast region.

A number of elements in the B.C. Binning house were highlighted in contemporary descriptions as *modern*. A rational rather than traditional approach to construction was demonstrated in its flat roof, expansive use of glass, and unadorned construction. Functionalism was evident in a convenient single-storey space-conserving plan which eliminated the separate dining room, economized space in the kitchen, and rationalized the disposition of rooms. An abstract sensibility ordered the planar vocabulary used in built-in furniture and interior and exterior detailing. The concern was to maximize light and space.

The house was perceived as regional in its use of unpainted Fir plywood, cedar v-joint lumber, and local granite inside and out, its accommodation of site (there is a three-step differentiation between street and garden sides, corresponding to the fall of the land), and its view. Completing the cues of the western provenance of the home were paintings and murals by Binning that, in subject and colour, referred to the locale; a collection of oriental objects that recalled the proximity of the Orient and the west coast's position on the Pacific Rim; and Scandinavian furniture that, in its use of wood, had inspired local furniture design.<sup>13</sup> Binning had achieved his goal of developing an architecture based on the precedents he had discovered in Europe while exploiting all "the attractive qualities" of local materials. Initially, however, the house was understood to exemplify a modern form of architecture that just happened to be located on the west coast.

Binning's house therefore marks the consciousness of a west coast style. It was not until the postwar era that such homes would be considered as distinctively west coast, rather than merely modern — or deemed desirable by a significant number of patrons. The change in perception after the war is no more poignantly emphasized than in the comparison of prewar and postwar reports on west coast homes. In 1939, Colonial, Cape Cod, and International Modern coexisted comfortably.<sup>14</sup> Less than a decade later, C.E. Pratt could illustrate "Contemporary Domestic Architecture in British Columbia" with 15 examples, all modern in the manner of the Binning home.<sup>15</sup> Although Pratt does not give to these houses the stylistic label "west coast," he does explain these contemporary houses in terms of distinctive topography, climate, and materials. He confirms as well that the various schools of modern architectural thought had been made indigenous to British Columbia.

Much had changed in the years between 1939 and 1947. The "Art in Living Group" had held several exhibitions celebrating modern aesthetics and the single family home. Richard Neutra had spoken several times in Vancouver about the sociological importance of the home and its siting.<sup>16</sup> Neutra, a European architect who had adapted his modernism to the regional characteristics of coastal California, was seen as an especially apt spokesperson for the aims of the Art in Living Group and of those interested in a west coast style. For similar reasons, the California-based publication *Arts and Architecture* proved influential. During this period its Case Study Houses, which were modern and experimental in construction and plan, were published and built.<sup>17</sup> Also influential at this time were Frank Lloyd Wright's low-cost Usonian houses, which he had developed as a means to preserve the single family and provide it with economical suburban privacy and amenity.

Locally, two events were influential. One was the expansion of the University of British Columbia. This not only facilitated the establishment of the School of Architecture at the university, but also attracted new faculty who would have among them patrons of the regional Pacific Coast style. The second potent event was the development of a post-and-beam construction system which allowed much greater freedom in positioning floors and windows than did the more traditional stud wall construction. This system consisted of posts (usually 4"x4", 3"x8" or 4"x6") widely spaced (from 4 to 12 feet on centre) and bridged by equally-spaced beams which in turn supported the roof. The resulting open spaces could then be filled with large glass panels or sliding doors. The aesthetic of expansive, unencumbered interior spaces and freely disposed facades could thus be achieved. The substitution of this method for traditional 2"x4"@16" stud framing was encouraged. This new construction technique, or a hybrid of it and conventional stud framing, became common in the immediate postwar years.<sup>18</sup> A building could now rise and fall with the contours of the land. Less directly influential was the fact that Canada had initiated a policy to promote secondary industry and to make it competitive internationally and economic provincially.<sup>19</sup> One result of this policy was the "New Design Centre," which was established in Ottawa to encourage Canadian design and manufacture and to educate designers, manufacturers, and the public in good, modern design. In British Columbia, another response was furniture production which used local woods and vied with Scandinavian design. Competitive design therefore had an economic imperative and rationale in the postwar period of which both professional designers and public were made well aware. This, no doubt, promoted a creativity on the part of the designer and a receptivity on the part of the public for an internationally-aware and competitive architecture (which also had a role in developing the local economy).

Four houses have been chosen as important examples of the working out of the "west coast" style in the immediate postwar era. The first house, the President's House at the University of British Columbia, was chosen because an appropriate style for the University of British Columbia — modern or traditional (neo-gothic) — was debated throughout the design process. The public and institutional use and meanings of modern, regional, and traditional are highlighted in this 1946-50 building.

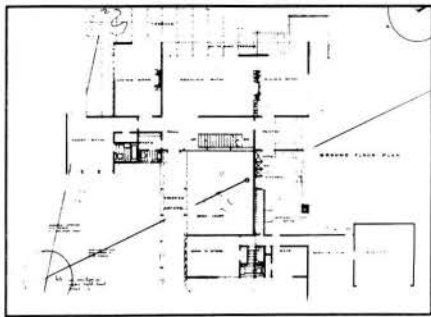


Figure 7. University of British Columbia President's House by Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, 1946. Plan. (University of British Columbia, Special Collections)

The 1949 Daniells house was chosen because of the insight which it gives into the patronage of this style. The Porter residence 1948-49 and the Copp residence of 1951 were chosen because, as 1952 Massey Medal winners, they present the full formulation and recognition of the style. It is beyond the scope of this present study to elaborate fully on all aspects of postwar developments in west coast house design. The works chosen are but signposts in the development of this distinctive architecture.

### THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE

In 1944 no President's House existed at the University of British Columbia, nor could any suitable extant building be acquired for this purpose. The new president, Norman MacKenzie, was therefore given temporary accommodation on campus in two army huts in Acadia Camp. Although they were converted into an eleven room house, complete with fireplace, they were inadequate for the public role of a university president. The president was not only the representative of the university but also, indirectly, of the province as a spokesperson for higher education. In addition, he was a spokesperson of the nation as a member of the Massey Commission between 1949 and 1951. Although both the president and his wife had a voice in the design of the house, the university was the owner and the university's architects, Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, the designers. The house was an official residence, not a private one, and as such had an institutional and public programme and meaning. The institution of president as defined by the university was therefore to be a factor in the representational content of the design. An outline of this institutional persona can be gleaned from the image which the university Board of Governors gave of their ideal president at this time. They felt he should be

of sufficient imagination to envisage the enormous future potentialities of our Institution as a main source in the Province of humanitarian culture and scientific research particularly as this latter activity bears upon the development of the natural resources of British Columbia.<sup>20</sup>

He should also be "of a cosmopolitan mind but with a mind tintured with Western Canadian ideas and the Western outlook."<sup>21</sup> The person chosen as best able to fulfill this ideal was Norman MacKenzie. He was not only the president who would be involved with the design of the house, he was also the president who would support and inaugurate the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia. His role, then, was to be future-oriented, both scientist and humanist, both cosmopolitan and western in outlook. He was to be all these things in a period when the controversy between modern and more cautious and evolutionary traditional styles was launched at the university. The events of this controversy may have had some influence on the evolution of the commission.

In April of 1946, the university architects proposed the first house design (figure 7).<sup>22</sup> It was to be, judging from the plans, surprisingly and stunningly modern: a three-storey structure layered into its hillside site and extended into the landscape by terraces, open courts, balconies, and walls of glass. It was an arrangement of asymmetrically disposed wings defined by dynamically placed planes. A promenade, consisting of circular drive and rectilinear path, led to an entry located within a court and sheltered by overhanging eaves. Inside, the house opened up to views of the sea and mountains. The house was rationally zoned according to function. The service wing was separated from the public areas and given its own direct street access. Public areas were accessible to the garden and views, while private accommodation was removed to the second storey and a children's area was sequestered in one wing of the basement level. Privacy and scenery were served by courts and balconies. Its flowing space, extensive glass walls, and planar definition directed one outward toward the views and the varied levels of terraces organically related to the landscape. The house would have contrasted dramatically with the heavy massing, gothic detailing, cellular spaces, and inward orientation toward the central mall of the existing university buildings. The house plans did not defer to the collegiate gothic then expected of campus buildings, but did comply with notions of home and family life then advocated by progressive groups and by the president himself.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, with its five bathrooms and six fireplaces, it was extravagant, expensive, and consequently rejected — presumably by the Board of Governors, but perhaps by the university president himself.

In June two modified designs were presented. The first (20 June) showed slight changes, the second (21 June) was a much reduced alternative. These, too, were abandoned, and the project would not be resumed until 1949. The delay might be explained by the heated architectural debate then in progress. Much of the debate was public, and centred on the design of new campus buildings. In February of 1946, the newly-formed Pre-Architectural Club brought its regionalist demands to the attention of President MacKenzie as a rationale

for a School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia.<sup>24</sup> Both regionalism and a school of architecture were given public prominence in articles published in the student paper, *The Ubysey*, in March.<sup>25</sup> On 30 March and 1 April Neutra lectured to the general public, both downtown and at the university.<sup>26</sup> It was following these conspicuous arguments for a modern and regional, as opposed to traditional, architecture that the first design for the President's House was presented. The succeeding plans of 20 June and 21 June remained in the modern style, although at a reduced scale.

The controversy over modernism and tradition at the university intensified with the arrival of Fred Lasserre as the director of the School of Architecture in September of 1946.<sup>27</sup> Lasserre was a McGill graduate who had studied modern design in Switzerland and had worked with the British avant-garde architectural group Tecton prior to his appointment. He was a strident polemicist for modern architectural design. He also proposed that the School of Architecture play a major consulting role in campus design and building. Between 1946 and 1949, when the design for the president's house was resumed, much was debated as to the merits of modern design as opposed to the collegiate gothic style traditional to the university.<sup>28</sup> Within a few months of his arrival Lasserre had made the question of modern or traditional design a major issue, asserting that

A decision should soon be reached by the University authorities as to whether the style of the buildings should be imitation gothic or frankly and honestly modern. You may be able to justify a sentimental compromise with true Gothic as in the Library but it is impossible to justify a compromise with Modern. "Modern" means honestly expressing the needs of today, through the frank and economical use of structure and materials in contemporary architectural language.<sup>29</sup>

Obviously the university was still undecided as to the architectural image it wished to project. Lasserre also explained that either modern or gothic "would upset too many and therefore compromise" had been MacKenzie's policy.<sup>30</sup>

It was perhaps this policy, as well as the projected building's high costs, which decided the abandonment of the 1946 plans. On the other hand, Lasserre's identification of the "sentimentality, cultural morass, lack of vitality and backwardness" of existing university architecture also made choosing an historicist style difficult.<sup>31</sup>

The final plan, prepared by R.A.D. Berwick and erected between 1949 and 1950, differed significantly from the 1946 proposals (figure 8). It was decidedly more subdued in its modernism: its spaces were less free-flowing, its equilibrium less dynamic, its planning more conventional. B.C. Binning's modernist colour sensibility was employed inside and out. The exterior was broken into horizontal bands of yellow above, white below in an attempt to minimize the height of the two-storey street facade. The consciously subdued interior colour scheme was enlivened by more vivid accents: a coral door and walls of turquoise (dining room), moss green (hall), and rust red (recreation room) contrasted with the natural colour of wood and slate.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as the *Western Homes and Living* article devoted to it pointed out, the house exhibited decidedly "western" characteristics: a low, elongated ranch-style profile; overhangs; exposed beams, vertical beaded siding, and horizontal weatherboard; a siting which took advantage of sea and mountain views; interior plantings which served to unite exterior and interior; and a mixture of formality and informality.<sup>33</sup> Horizontality, materials, and view signified the regional character.

The important public and institutional programme of the house was also portrayed in the lavishly illustrated article in *Western Homes and Living*. This programme was emphasized in photographs documenting the official visits to the house of Prime Minister and Mrs. St. Laurent, The Right Honourable Vincent Massey, The Honourable L.B. Pearson, and Sir Phillip Morris. Contemporary Canadian paintings by Binning, Scott, Schaeffer, and others, plus a Harris over the fireplace, further defined the modern and west coast quality of the house. Contemporary notions of the humanities were also suggested in this prominent display of modern art. In speaking on "Canada in the Post War World" President MacKenzie affirmed the need to consider the "aesthetic qualities of the new material environment," to redress the imbalance between the sciences on one hand and "the arts and spiritual values" on the other.<sup>34</sup> Similar concerns for the humanities in modern life were expressed in the report of the Massey Royal Commission, which gathered its findings at this time.<sup>35</sup>

The house addressed a cosmopolitan audience in a voice "tinctured with western ideas and western outlook" (figures 9 and 10).<sup>36</sup> It represented an institution where the balance of fine art and functional planning, local materials and sophisticated use of colour, traditional oak paneling and abstract patterning, contemporary timber construction and conventional rooms, openness to the grandeur of nature paired with customary flower beds, and Harris' spiritualized nature could form the context for the discussion of "scientific research

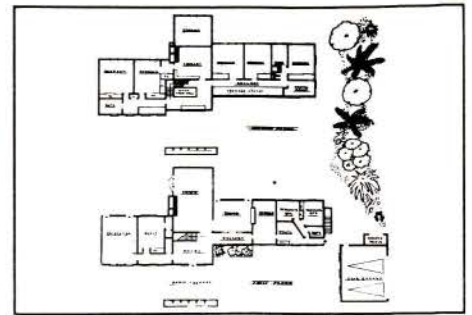


Figure 8. University of British Columbia President's House by R.A.D. Berwick, 1949. Plan. (*Western Homes & Gardens* [March 1953])



Figure 9. President's House by R.A.D. Berwick, 1949. Garden view. (*Western Homes & Gardens* [March 1953])



Figure 10. President's House by R.A.D. Berwick, 1949. Interior. (*Western Homes & Gardens* [March 1953])



Figure 11. Daniells house by John Porter (and Catherine Wisnicki), 1948-49. (Photo: Sherry McKay, 1989)

particularly as [it] bears upon the development of the natural resources of British Columbia," and a place where the president could "Pursue unflinchingly the task of transmuting these potentialities into realities."<sup>37</sup>

### THE DANIELLS HOUSE

Roy Daniells, recently appointed to the English Department at the University of British Columbia, was one of several new faculty members who became patrons of the west coast style. He found no houses to his taste or budget when he arrived. He had lived in a modern house built by an architect in Winnipeg and had become convinced of the merits of good architectural design.<sup>38</sup> Through university colleagues he met John Porter and Catherine Wisnicki, then associated with the new School of Architecture. An awkward but inexpensive site was found on the University Endowment Lands (UEL). The problems presented by the site, irregular in topography and plan, were those then being addressed in design tutorials at the School of Architecture and solved by the use of modern construction. The programme required the accommodation of a family (and future changes within it), flexibility of plan, and economy in construction. The house would be the smallest allowed by the UEL zoning bylaws.

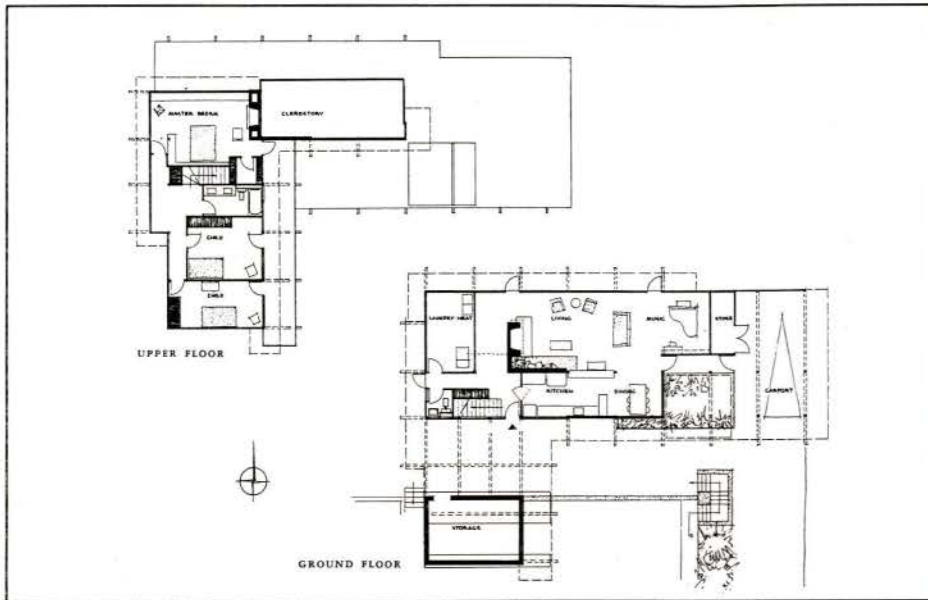
Both Porter and Wisnicki had received their architectural education at McGill, where European modernism had already gained adherents. The architectural concerns discussed and emphasized by the architects were primarily two: open planning and the extension of the house into the garden. This was achieved by the elimination of partition walls, the use of glass, and the placement of major living spaces on the second storey. The house was originally designed to be much more open within than was built: a wall between hall and living room was added at the client's request and a conventional door was substituted for a sliding glass one by the builder, who had never built a modern home before and misunderstood its aesthetic. The poor quality and unavailability of materials of the required dimensions, particularly timber of required length, led to a living room narrower than envisioned and a compromised sense of spaciousness.

Despite these alterations, the design by Porter and Wisnicki is still modern, strikingly so for the period and disturbingly so to its neighbours (figure 11). It is a stark cube defined by a shed roof, planes of stucco (originally apricot colour), and grey-green wooden siding. The composition is based on distinct disengaged planes and asymmetrically-placed details. The end walls project beyond the street facade, eschewing a closed, box-like appearance. Windows are grouped into horizontal bands or float as rectangular shapes. A dynamically canted canopy is suspended above the door and a linear disposition of planting projects from the house. The operation of a modernist aesthetic is clear. The house is also modern and unconventional in its planning: the entry is at the bedroom level, and the living room does not command a view of the street from a picture window. Instead, it opens to a secluded terrace and garden via glass doors. The living room and dining room are open to each other while a pass-through offers easy and direct access between kitchen and dining room. Natural light flows through clerestory windows and artificial light is softened by a light trough whose planar projection liberates the ceiling plane from wall planes. Pragmatic economies in space have been maximized by the aesthetic devices developed by modernists: spatial flow, disengaged planes, open volumes, light, and dynamic diagonals. These devices were used in Europe but were also to be found locally, as in C.E. Pratt's modern Vancouver home of two years earlier, which had pioneered the uniquely west coast post-and-beam structure. The connection to regional precedent in locally-devised wood construction, plus the painting by local artist Sam Black over the fireplace and a native American Indian dish, signal the west coast locale.

### THE PORTER HOUSE

In 1949, John Porter designed a home for himself and his family on a large and secluded site in West Vancouver (figure 1). The site's hilly topography made it impractical for conventional construction methods but inexpensive to purchase. For his design Porter was awarded the silver medal at the Massey Architectural Awards in 1952. To the structure's conventional framing was added the newly devised post-and-beam construction to afford twelve foot spans and volumetric intricacies defined by enormous panes of glass or tongue-and-groove cedar siding.<sup>39</sup> A spectacular glass wall opened the house directly to a terrace and small creek to the northwest, and a dramatically inclined roof plane pinned the house to its site along its western edge. The dynamics of space created by plane and line were explored in the cedar plank ceiling which extends well beyond a dematerialized wall, in the lightly framed balcony cantilevered into space, and in the cedar siding continued from exterior to interior. The wood was unpainted, the space unencumbered by massive barriers, and the site relatively undeveloped.

Figure 12. Copp house by Ron Thom (of Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt), 1950. Plan. (JRAIC [January 1953])



The exterior was not the result of theatrics but an expression of the plan, a very pragmatic concern for family living, and an acceptance of undisguised local materials. Materials and finishes were chosen for economy, low maintenance, and aesthetics: walls are of plywood largely unpainted, floors are of waxed concrete, and windows are bereft of fussy, uncleanable detailing.<sup>40</sup> Family living was accommodated in spaces divided into contiguous functional areas by changes in floor level or temporary partitions. The hilly site and construction possibilities of post-and-beam were exploited to create staggered levels which provided intimacy and garden access. Hence, the family room was one-half level below the living room and lead to a lower garden down the slope of the site. The house does not rise to challenge the landscape as a foreign object, but exists in harmony with its materials, irregularities of topography, and wealth of plant life.

In discussing the house Mrs. Porter emphasized its modernity: functional zoning with adult living space distinct from children's area; a kitchen scientifically planned for comfortable working, easy maintenance, and built-in labour-saving devices; a dining area rationally divided from the living room by curtains when needed.<sup>41</sup> The house was built for "a contemporary way of living," which meant to Mrs. Porter no traditional walled rooms, no small windows, and no separate dining room; her chief planning requirement was that the house leave time for leisure.<sup>42</sup> The dynamic vocabulary of European modernism witnessed in the Daniells' house has been transformed by a re-interpretation of space and function, the relationship of house to nature, and the scale of opposition between transparent glass and opaque wood.

## THE COPP HOUSE

The Copp house was built for Dr. Harold Copp soon after he arrived from California to join the Medical faculty at the University of British Columbia. He found local houses too expensive and too much like those in Toronto, "boxy."<sup>43</sup> He came with some knowledge of architectural alternatives, however. The Copps had learned of the local firm of Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt from the popular national magazine *Saturday Night* prior to their move to Vancouver. They had also formed an architectural preference for the characteristic features of the Craftsman bungalows of the 1900s while living in one in California. They had particularly liked the bungalow's use of natural wood finishes on the interior and exterior, its well-crafted built-in furniture, its spaciousness within, and its related landscaping without. A site was eventually located just west of the UEL, on the bluff overlooking Locarno Beach. Three things were paramount in the minds of the clients: recapturing the quality of their former California home, expressing a love of the land, and achieving an economical family home. The foundations of an earlier abandoned project by Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt existed on the site and their firm was contacted. Pratt prepared a new design for the site, but this was rejected due to its large size and butterfly roof, which the Copps considered unappealing. Ron Thom was then suggested as an alternate architect.

Thom's design possessed an open plan, functional zoning, spatial economies, and outdoor living space (figure 12). It was designed to utilize low maintenance materials and

finishes. It had a flat roof and a dynamic composition of planes and voids (figure 2). In these characteristics it was modern. It also had extensive eaves and a mixed structure of stud framing and post-and-beam construction infilled with unpainted cedar siding or planes of glass. In this it was connotative of the west coast. The house was, however, more reticent in its modernity than the Porter house, more earthbound and private. It suggested some different inspirations.

Sequestered living, private and secure, a peaceful retreat from the world-at-large, had been Thom's aim. This preference he admittedly shared with Frank Lloyd Wright, whose Usonian homes had received increased recognition and popularization in the late 1940s. Also, by 1949, *Arts and Architecture* of California had sponsored and published 13 houses and 7 projects of its experimental Case Study Houses.<sup>44</sup> Both Wright and *Arts and Architecture* had regionalist slants to their modernism. Thom had also been influenced by developments within the local arts scene: Harris, Varley, Jack Shadbolt, and Binning had been his tutors. It was from this environment that Thom received his early introduction to architecture. Through Binning he had met Neutra, whose discussion of the sociological importance of design and landscaping, and the poetics of site, had turned him from painting to architecture as a medium of expression.<sup>45</sup>

When Thom came to design the Copp house he responded to the site, emphasizing that the house should merge with the landscape and be attuned to available views.<sup>46</sup> The merging of the house with the landscape is distinctive. It is this which is emphasized by long, horizontal spreading wings which are nestled into the hill rather than suspended from it. Nature determines the soft browns highlighted only with an autumn red-ochre. The colour palette, the weaving of construction and detail, and the derivation of ornament from material and structure resembles that of native Indian artifacts, baskets, and Salish houses then reverently discussed by Thom and local artists.<sup>47</sup> The glimpses of forest and light through idiosyncratic clerestory windows suggest the same celebration of the density of the west coast rain forest one finds recorded by Emily Carr, whom Thom admired greatly.

Thom's choice of Neutra and Wright, the Harris circle, and Carr as mentors is an interesting one, different from that of many preceding architects representative of progressive design on the west coast during this period — Thornton, Berwick, Lasserre, and Porter, architects largely trained in Eastern Canada or Europe. Between 1939 and 1946 modern architecture, premised on a rational approach to design and an aesthetic of plane and volume, was established on the west coast. From 1946 to 1952, the formative period of Thom's career, there was a shift of emphasis from a west coast which was modern to a modern design which was *west coast*, indigenous and unique.

Throughout this period an imagery expressive of experience on the west coast had been advocated by artists such as Harris, Varley, and Shadbolt; the existence of a Pacific Rim had been explored and defined by Varley and Macdonald; regional uniqueness had been probed by B.C. Binning and, as was stated earlier, was one rationale for creating a local School of Architecture in 1946. In the same year Neutra had brought the poetics of site to the fore. There are undoubtedly other protagonists of a regional design in the late 1940s and early 1950s yet to be discovered and additional elements yet to be identified.

By 1952, elements which were felt to be expressive of the west coast could be found in the Copp house. It sits sheltered within its site, open to the view, distanced from neighbours and street. Small intimate spaces are defined by profuse planting on the exterior and by the slightest screen of glass on the interior. Light breaks through wooden beams, and towering trees ring the clearing which marks the house's place within the landscape. It is reminiscent of Emily Carr's "Old Time Coastal Village."

Two statements made by Thom are relevant in trying to explain his aim. One concerned the need for ease and relief from the frustrations of everyday life, that privacy was a constant concern.<sup>48</sup> The second was an oft-repeated quote that "the landscape must win in the end."<sup>49</sup> There is in the Copp house a certain turning from the modern world, a distancing from the skyscraper life which was once a contained view from the terrace but is now all but obliterated by the resurgence of the trees so protected by the Copps. By means of its many references, as cited above, the Copp house becomes a celebration of the landscape of culture rather than the landscape of industry.

In 1952 the Copp house received its silver medal. It had been the intent of the Massey Commission to promote the humanities and to balance the burgeoning of science and technology after the war with the arts: to redirect a misguided abandonment of the humanities for an overzealous embrace of technology.<sup>50</sup> Writing in the *Royal Commission Studies* in 1951, Eric Arthur gave British Columbia as his only Canadian example of the "emergence of those regional characteristics that marked previous great historic movements



in architecture,"<sup>51</sup> and concluded his report on present conditions in architecture with the following:

To talk of a Canadian Architecture is not far-fetched so long as one recognizes that within it will be found all the difference of spirit between York Minster and Salisbury Cathedral. To talk, on the other hand, of a Canadian Architecture indistinguishable in manner from coast to coast is to deny the basic principles of modern architecture, and to ignore the cultural heritage of our country.<sup>52</sup>

Just why these houses, notably the Porter and Copp houses as recipients of Massey medals, should be singled out for national attention can not, at this point, be conclusively answered. However, the words "modern" and "cultural heritage" seem keys to the interpretation. The postwar period in Canada was an era of intense interest in defining the uniqueness of Canada. This was one objective of the Massey Commission, whose full title was *The Massey Royal Commission on the National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences*. This cultural preoccupation is also revealed in observations made by Northrop Frye about this era:

It is not always realized that unity and identity are quite different things to be promoting, and that in Canada they are perhaps more different than they are anywhere else. Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture.<sup>53</sup>

The Copp house, built not just of local materials and a rational approach to design, but also of a rich local culture, was able to evoke such an identity. It was able to do so in part because, by this time, certain architectural elements had come, through repeated use, public presentation, and professional articulation, to connote a regional Pacific Coast style, a style which had a role to play in defining Canadian modernity and cultural heritage.

## CONCLUSION

The significance of the houses discussed above lies not only in their singular achievements but also in the part they played in a more general cultural development. Certain similarities can be identified. They were built for family life and on a modest budget. They were all built in newly-developing suburbs, the University Endowment Lands and its periphery, West Vancouver or North Vancouver, where land was relatively inexpensive. The sites, although large, heavily treed, and secluded, were also of irregular terrain and isolated. They often posed problems for conventional building techniques, although this also resulted in reduced land costs. A locally developed post-and-beam structural system which allowed the use of these sites was also a common feature. Economies were also achieved in plan through the use of flexible partitioning of space and visual extension of interior spaces to exterior gardens. The architects had a modernist aesthetic which, when translated into local materials and experimental construction, maximized the potential for view and privacy. Although economy was a major concern of the patrons of these houses, it was not their only priority; a desire for a distinctive west coast architecture was explicit in the architecture and implicit in the accoutrements of home and garden. The architecture, heralded in professional journals and popular press, and in the awarding of Massey Medals, can be understood as a solution to postwar problems that ranged from economics and new markets and materials to culture and its efficacy as a code of knowledge in a changing nation.

## Endnotes

- 1 John Woodworth, "A study in basic home design in Vancouver where Modern meets Traditional," *Western Homes and Living*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August/September 1950), p. 33.
- 2 Editorial, *Western Homes and Living*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August/September 1950), p. 9.
- 3 Eric Arthur, "Architecture," *Royal Commission Studies: A Selection of Essays Prepared for the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences* (Ottawa: Edmond Cloutier, 1951), p. 422.
- 4 "M.H. Spaulding Residence by James Murray," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 29, no. 11 (November 1952), pp. 326-328. "J.S. Kennedy House by A.J. Donahue," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1 (January 1952), pp. 335-337.
- 5 The following give some insight into the debate on modernism in Canadian architecture during this period:  
Sydney Cooper, "Up-to-date Houses are Long Overdue," *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (August 1947), pp. 40, 47;  
Sydney Cooper "Are Canadians too Conservative to Live in Modern Homes?" *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (October 1947), pp. 44, 72;  
Milton Osborne, "The Modern and Traditional Interpretation of Architecture," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4 (April 1936), pp. 63-70;  
Bruce Wright, "The Modern Small Home," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4 (April 1936), pp. 71-75;  
"International Style Not Popular," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 8, no. 12 (December 1936), p. 229.
- 6 Illustrated in *Vancouver Art and Artists 1931-1983* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), pp. 28, 29.
- 7 "A Sane Modern House," *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, vol. 16 (August 1939), p.25;  
"Willoughby House, West Vancouver," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 16, no. 5 (May 1939), p. 100;  
"A One Storey Design," *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, vol. 16 (October 1939), p. 35.  
Both these houses were designed by R.A.D. Berwick, an architect who had graduated from the University of Toronto and began to practice in British Columbia about 1936 when he joined the firm of Sharp and Thompson. After the war he would become one of the younger partners in the firm which subsequently became Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt.
- 8 "Modern In The Far West," *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, vol. 17 (August 1940), pp. 15-17.  
The house is identified as the architect's own home in this article. In 1947, C.E. Pratt identifies it as the Madame Runge house and gives as its architects Gardiner and Thornton; this no doubt refers to its owner in 1947 and Thornton's professional association at that later date (see footnote 15). With respect to the chronology of modern house design on the west coast in the late thirties, exact dates have not been established. However, it would appear that these three houses were built within a year of each other, although initial design and final completion times may vary. Other examples may yet be discovered.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *Western Homes and Living*, vol. 1, no. 2 (October/November 1950), p. 15.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *Vancouver Art and Artists*, p. 76.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, vol. 16 (May 1939), pp. 98, 99, 100; vol. 16 (August, 1939), pp. 23, 25; vol. 16 (October 1939), p. 35.
- 15 C.E. Pratt, "Contemporary Domestic Architecture in British Columbia," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 24, no. 6 (June 1947), pp. 179-198, 219.
- 16 University of British Columbia (UBC), Special Collections, Scrapbook of the School of Architecture, vol. 1, p. 5.
- 17 *Arts and Architecture* introduced the issues of housing, the importance of the family, and the work of Neutra and other modern architects in its first issue in 1943. The Case Study House project began with the commission of eight houses in 1945; the results were published in 1946.
- 18 Keith B. Davidson, "Wood Framing Developments," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 27, no. 9 (September 1950), pp. 313-315, and Scrapbook of the School of Architecture, vol. 1, p. 5. Pratt is a key figure in the development of this new construction technique and thus key to the development of the west coast style; his Saba House of 1947 was seminal.
- 19 For example, the New Design Index was established in 1943, and comments about local industry were repeated in *Western Homes and Living*, 1950-53. See also Scott Watson, "Art in the Fifties: Design, Leisure and Painting in the Age of Anxiety," *Vancouver Art and Artists*, pp. 72-81.
- 20 P.B. Waite, *Lord of Point Grey* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), pp. 111-112.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Plans by Sharp and Thompson, Berwick, Pratt deposited in UBC, Special Collections, dated April 1946, 20 June 1946, and 21 June 1946.
- 23 UBC, Special Collections, Norman MacKenzie Papers, Box 97, pp. 2-27. "The Home, The Basic Institution of Society: The Place of the Home and Family in the Modern World," an address to the Canadian Home Economic Association, Calgary, 25 August 1948. This was reprinted in *Canadian Home Economics Newsletter*, vol. 5, no. 9 (September 1948), pp. 69-71.
- 24 Scrapbook of the School of Architecture, n.p.
- 25 Ibid. (*The Ubyssy*, 22 March 1946).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid. (*The Ubyssy*, November 1946).
- 28 Ibid; Fred Lasserre, "Man's Needs Forever Challenge Architects," *The Vancouver Sun* Supplement, November 1948; *The Ubyssy*, 2 March 1948; "Lasserre-Controversy over the Style of Architecture at UBC-Misquoted," *The Student Chronicle*, October 1948; Osmonde J. Ham, "Speaking Architecturally," *Graduate Chronicle*, October 1948; "Our Old Fashioned University," *The Vancouver Sun*, 30 October 1946; "Old Fashioned UBC Buildings Rapped," *Vancouver News Herald* [October 1948]; Fred Lasserre, "Letter to the Editor," *The Vancouver Sun*, November 1948; Fred Lasserre, "Professor Lasserre Explains Stand on 'Old Fashioned' UBC Buildings," *Vancouver News Herald* [3 November 1948]; UBC, Special Collections, Board of Governors' Records, vol. 29, March 1950, C.J. Thompson to Norman MacKenzie, 21 June 1950; P.B. Waite, *Lord of Point Grey*, note 28, p. 240.
- 29 UBC, Special Collections, Board of Governors' Records, Lasserre to Norman MacKenzie, 25 November 1946.
- 30 UBC, Special Collections, Board of Governors' Records, Lasserre to C.J. Thompson, 4 December 1946.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 "The President's House," *Western Homes and Living*, vol. 3 (March 1953), p. 21.
- 33 Ibid., pp. 20-23.
- 34 UBC, Special Collections, Norman MacKenzie Papers, Box 97, pp. 2-27. Norman MacKenzie, "Canada in the Post War World," speech to the B.C. Medical Association, Victoria, September 1943.
- 35 Malcolm Wallace, "Humanities," *Royal Commission Studies*, pp. 99-118.
- 36 P.B. Waite, *Lord of Point Grey*, pp. 111-112.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Interview with Laurenda Daniells, Vancouver, 28 April 1988.
- 39 Keith B. Davidson, "Wood Framing Developments," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 27, no. 9 (September 1950), pp. 313-315.
- 40 "Porter House," *RAIC Journal*, vol. 27, no. 9 (September 1950), pp. 308-309.
- 41 "My Ideal Home," *Western Homes and Living*, vol. 1, no. 2 (October/November 1950), pp. 11, 49.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Copp, Vancouver, 3 May 1988. Much of the personal detail is derived from this interview.
- 44 Esther McCoy, *Case Study Houses: 1945-1962*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, Inc., 1977), p. 11.
- 45 Conversation with Ron Thom, Vancouver, October 1986.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 UBC, Fine Arts Library, Ron Thom Files: Adele Freedman, "Ron Thom."
- 49 Don Gutstein, "No Fixed Position," *Western Living*, vol. 17, no.1 (January 1984), p. 27.
- 50 Malcolm Wallace, "Humanities," *Royal Commission Studies*, pp. 99-118.
- 51 Eric Arthur, "Architecture," *Royal Commission Studies*, p. 422.
- 52 Ibid., p. 423.
- 53 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi Press Ltd., 1971), p. ii.