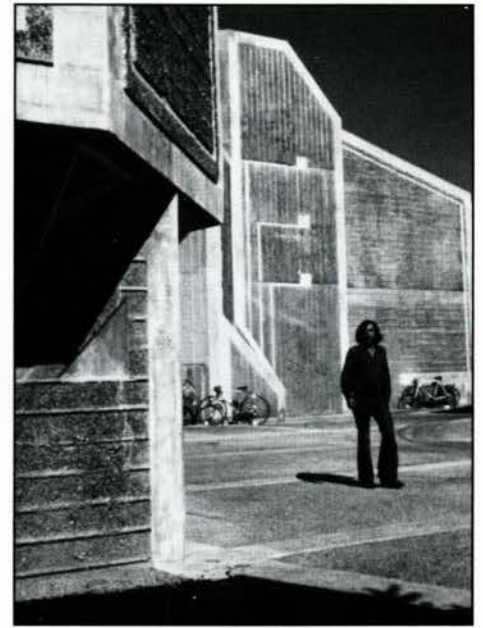


Organic Modernism: The Architecture of F.T. Hollingsworth

Fred Thornton Hollingsworth, born in Britain in 1918 but resident in Vancouver since 1929 and trained there, has been accorded the highest honours and posts within his profession. Presiding over the Architectural Institute of British Columbia in 1971-72 and the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada in 1975-76, he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1976 and has received numerous design awards, most notably the 1964 Massey Gold Medal for the Maltby house in West Vancouver, built 1962-63 (figure 1).¹ That house exemplifies his significant contribution to the quite complex evolution of what is commonly, if simplistically, denominated the West Coast style,² and his longstanding admiration for, but inventive rethinking of, the progressive organic principles implemented by Frank Lloyd Wright and revised by the Bay Region School architects. Hollingsworth adapted those design strategies to complete a remarkable tally of houses, predominantly inexpensive through the 1950s, but of a compounding richness of architectural form and expression since the mid 1960s. If the later houses are aesthetically the most satisfying, his earlier modular post-and-beam houses, planned to be erected with maximum efficiency at minimum cost atop a concrete slab on grade with radiant heating, exemplify the achievement in postwar Vancouver of the Modernist objective of inexpensive, broadly accessible, good design.



By Rhodri Windsor Liscombe



Hollingsworth forged an idiosyncratic style through a liberal appreciation, yet creative adaptation, of appropriate architectural idioms. He has worked in larger offices and in partnership, but has sought and preferred independent practice. He developed his marked facility for drawing at the Vancouver School of Art, together with his childhood friend Ron Thom, and, from 1946 to 1952, in the office of the renowned Vancouver firm of Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, which championed transatlantic Modernist theory and practice. He completed his articling with another distinguished local architect, William H. Birmingham, whose associate he became between 1952 and 1958; from 1963 to 1968 he worked in partnership with Barry Downs.³ He explored the concepts of more local and informal, naturalized and functionalist design idioms in discussion with "The Intellectuals," a group of like-minded peers who included Thom, Downs, Beans Justice, Bud Wood, and Arthur Erickson.

Hollingsworth has also completed excellent work in architectural typologies other than domestic: witness his attractively efficient Berkeley [Old Person's] Hospital at White Rock (1961), and equally vividly articulated Imperial Inn motel at Victoria (1962). Each manipulated aspects of the formal discipline and visual subtlety of Wrightian and Japanese conventions. About a decade later he designed the powerfully massed Law School addition at the University of British Columbia (figure 2). This was deliberately organized around a central corridor and communal space, originally to have been landscaped, in order to rectify the habitual distance between faculty and students. Hollingsworth, inspired by the Masonic tradition, included his dynamic square-signature motif in the framework to add pattern. While such detailing might recall the American Arts and Crafts heritage, the striated, textural, concrete fabric manifested Hollingsworth's comprehension of 1950s Corbusian sculptural structural functionalism. All three commissions clearly demonstrate the cognitive, no less than intuitive, nature of his response to architectural program and culture, and collectively they illuminate the distinctive character of his work and underscore the essential significance of individual creativity in the process of design.⁴

The relatively discreet and stable cast of Hollingsworth's career in terms of training, experience, practice, and patronage, as well as geographical and cultural environment, affords a reliable basis for discerning the individual creative factor. "Good architecture," he commented in a recent interview, "comes from being essential." This pragmatic ethos signifies the formative importance for him of the core Modernist theory, especially of the close analysis of specified functions and their satisfaction through contemporary rather than traditional technology and aesthetic. This he learned through reading the primary literature and professional journals, especially when taking courses from John Peeps and Wolfgang Gerson in the Department of Architecture at the University of British Columbia.⁵ He had already acquired practical drafting and fabricating expertise as a prize-winning aircraft modeller, as the head of the Production

Figure 1 (above left). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; Maltby house, West Vancouver, B.C., 1962-63. Exterior view. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 2 (above). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; U.B.C. Law School extension, Vancouver, B.C., 1969-71. Exterior view. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 7 (previous page). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; "Residence for Mr. & Mrs. J. Moon," North Vancouver, B.C., June 1950. Presentation drawing. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

1 This slightly enlarged version of the paper read in the SSAC session of the Society of Architectural Historians annual meeting is based on discussions with Fred Hollingsworth and the study of his remarkably complete archive. He is unique among his generation of Canadian architects in having retained a fully rendered record of each project or commission, the latter further extended by photographs and notes. The paper derived from work on the forthcoming exhibition sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Architecture and Museum Assistance Programme under the title *Vancouver: The Spirit of Modernism*, together with a research project on "Creativity in Architecture" in collaboration with Professor Kenneth MacCrimmon, funded under a 1995 University of British Columbia Humanities and Social Sciences grant.

2 The most useful introduction is Sherry McKay, "Western Living, Western Homes," *SSAC Bulletin* 14, no. 3 (September 1989): 65-74, citing contemporary sources. However, in company with such recent studies as *The West Vancouver Survey of Significant Architecture, 1945-1975* (West Vancouver, B.C.: City Council, 1994), or the relevant section in the second volume of Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1994), it is insufficiently contextualized in the larger compass of transatlantic Modernism; aspects of that background to the quite diverse tapestry of West Coast design are discussed in this author's "Modes of Modernizing: The Acquisition of Modernist Design in Canada," *SSAC Bulletin* 19, no. 3 (September 1994): 60-74.

Figure 3. F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; Sven and Joan Rasmussen house, North Vancouver, B.C., 1949. Exterior view. (*Western Homes and Living*, December-January 1950-51), 13



3 Information derived from the archives of Hollingsworth and Birmingham, together with discussions with Downs and the membership files of the Architectural Institute of British Columbia. He undertook his articles under Birmingham who, in recognition of his design competence, denominated him "Design Associate."

4 Marxist and Post-Structuralist critical theory in particular seek to supplant the influence of individual creative ability and aesthetic concepts with the impact of socio-political and economically determined ideological imperatives, as exemplified by Thomas A. Markus, *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types* (London: Routledge, 1993). Yet the differences existing between the architectural work of Hollingsworth and Thom, who shared similar education and background, alone reinforces the necessity of endeavouring to understand individual creativity.

5 Hollingsworth, for example, recalls reading *Architectural Forum* assiduously through this period. Ironically, he did not at first pass the A.I.B.C. Senior Design paper, but was installed as a member in 1959.

6 Hollingsworth was required by the Capilano Highlands Development Company to have his house design vetted by Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, and happened to meet Charles E. "Ned" Pratt in that capacity. He was thereupon offered a drafting post in the office. Hollingsworth still lives in and practices from that house at 1205 Ridgewood Drive, built in 1945 and extended in 1959 and 1978.

7 The import of the Morris and other British motor cars was encouraged by the extensive waiting lists for new U.S. automobiles; several other friends of Hollingsworth who shared his enthusiasm for Modernist architecture and art owned Morrises, notably the developer/contractor Eric Allan, architectural photographer Graham Warrington, and painter Gordon Smith.

8 Pratt, in conversation, stressed his wish to be the architect of truly affordable housing and played an important part in encouraging H.R. MacMillan, of the major international forest industry company MacMillan Bloedel, to develop the standard prefabricated "Silverwall" system. According to Hollingsworth, he and Thom developed, briefly, an even cheaper modular system based upon inexpensive manufactured hollow plywood doors, inspired by a sale at an East Vancouver lumber supplier. The success of the post-and-beam system, and its particular association with postwar West Coast Modernism (despite its more pluralistic heritage) was celebrated in the B.C. Lumber Association book *Post and Beam* (Vancouver: B.C. Lumber Assn., 1960). See also Douglas Shadbolt, *Ron Thom: The Shaping of an Architect* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995).

9 One of the earliest "Flying Arrow" houses, built in 1950 for J.W. Atkins in the Capilano Highlands for a total expenditure of \$9,200, was published in the March 1952 issue of *Western Homes and Living* (pp. 14-16). The next year he completed another for Robert Hill, mortgage manager for Sun Life Insurance, signifying the broad acceptance of Modernist design in contemporary Vancouver.

Illustration Unit clarifying complex assembly procedures for artificers in Boeing's wartime Vancouver plant, and, just before joining Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt on the strength of designs for his own house, as a commercial advertising artist.⁶

His lifelong delight in drawing and modelling paralleled his fascination with spatial structural configuration: line implicating plane, depth, volume, plus pattern and texture. A project's functional or abstract requirement has therefore been inextricable from its aesthetic or psychological value, hence Hollingsworth's early admiration for the architecture of Dudok, Yeon, Harwell Harris, Maybeck, and Wright. When Neutra's quasi-scientific environmental Modernism was still preeminent in Vancouver, Hollingsworth journeyed on more than one occasion to meet Maybeck in San Francisco.

He had earlier visited Wright at Taliesin East, in 1951. (Incidentally, he crossed the northern states in a Morris Minor, the quintessential British people-machine, which became popular among those inspired by Modernist thinking who fashioned the optimistic, experimental, egalitarian tenor of Vancouver's postwar cultural community.⁷) Hollingsworth found Wright sunbathing, stark-naked, and in subsequent conversation found him steely-eyed and overbearing, even though Hollingsworth was offered work drafting the Price Tower in Bartlesville, Ohio. This visit, and his study of Wright's buildings, confirmed Hollingsworth's conviction in the validity of an organic approach to design, in contradistinction to the often necessarily utilitarian Modernism of the majority of his own work. The organic principles and practice espoused by Wright were evident in Hollingsworth's handsome 1951 house for Dr. and Mrs. William Shandro in Edmonton. Hollingsworth later defined his principles thus:

1. The use of natural or locally produced materials. He was disappointed by both the use and the masking of a long steel beam in Wright's Goetsch-Winkler house at Okemos, Michigan (1939).
2. The interrelationship of building with site—"of it, not on it"—taking account of orientation, usually having the main exposure to the south, for passive solar heating.
3. The relationship of interior to exterior.
4. The freedom of internal space. This is typified, together with the first three principles, in other pre-1951 commissions, notably the 1949 Sven Rasmussen house in Capilano Highlands, North Vancouver (figure 3), wherein Hollingsworth turned several corners in the living space with glazing between the structural posts.
5. The integral expression of form and structure.
6. The play of plane on plane.
7. The adaptation of natural structural lessons, such as the cantilever.

One direct expression of the last principle was Hollingsworth's extensive use of the modular post-and-beam system, and the development of an even more economical version than that created by his erstwhile mentor, C.E. "Ned" Pratt.⁸ The most numerous was the "Neoteric," from which he evolved other pre-cut modular variants under names such as "Development House" or "Flying Arrow."⁹ The simpler Neoteric form was specified for the Rasmussen house and the not-far-distant Eric Allan residence of



1950. Both these houses illustrate the paramountcy of practical and unostentatious values in the immediate postwar period, concentrated in B.C. upon reestablishing family and community. Note the captions and text accompanying their publication in *Western Homes and Living* and *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, respectively: "Small House That Acts Big" (1950-51), and "It's Home ... Inside and Out" (1952).¹⁰ Some veterans, including real estate developer Eric Allan, wanted to hire and could afford the services of an architect. An architect could permit "casual, easy living," instead of the stilted conventional pitched-roof suburban boxes, because many architects, Hollingsworth included, felt a sense of mission to provide inexpensive good design, and because land values were cheap. Allan, for example, subdivided the Capilano Highlands district of North Vancouver; there, young professionals could commission their own new house in which to raise a family. They so frequently chose a Neoteric variant that the area came to be dubbed Hollingsworth's "Oak Park."¹¹

The collaboration between Hollingsworth and Allan inspired a fascinating experimental house, erected in 1949 on the downtown parking lot of the Hudson's Bay Company department store (figure 4). Christened the "Sky Bungalow," it offers an intriguing comparison with Marcel Breuer's costlier Museum of Modern Art model house (1949), and with Wright's wood-frame houses, such as that for the Lewis family in Libertyville, Illinois (1940), inspected by Hollingsworth in 1951. Hollingsworth's consciously essential solution to the essential problem of shelter, measuring only some 55 x 18 feet, was built of local brick and wood (on steel supporting beams to conserve the maximum number of parking bays). In structure, spatial organization, and articulation, the Sky Bungalow demonstrated the principles, or principal constituents, of his architectural design and the ethos of what might be termed the Heroic, functionalist phase of postwar Modernism in Canada.¹² Indeed, Hollingsworth realized the "truly indigenous" American domestic architecture Kenneth Reid hoped for in 1944:

In plan they would take full advantage of the opportunity for openness afforded by modern heating, glazing, and structural methods. The interiors would be clean and simple and restful. In them, scientific knowledge of light and color would be applied with intelligent artistry to produce a comfortable background for family life and social activity.... A greater proportion of built-in furniture than in the past would help to increase this sense of order. Outdoor space would be integrated with the life of the family through useable and useful gardens, terraces, and patios, designed for gracious use, not for show.¹³

The living room in the Sky Bungalow was compact, yet rendered spacious by a series of carefully conceived and interrelated design strategies (figure 5). These began with the effective organization of plan and circulation, and continued with the inclusion of long vistas and the interplay of planes to reinforce the space-enhancing penetration of light sources on the vertical and horizontal axes. Those sources were carefully balanced to prevent excess single-direction illumination, usually by the diffusing effect of clerestories. That enfolding of structural opacity was controlled by the focal effect of the brick fireplace, which introduced the visual, and thereby psychological, sensation of functioning behavioral space. Moreover, it contributed to space-saving and ambience with its built-in shelving (with, as elsewhere, oriental artwork). The moulded plywood furniture—Hollingsworth has and continues to design more graceful and usable furniture than Wright—the books, the prints, and the flowers recall how that generation concurred with Wells Coates: the standardizing functionalism of Modernism would be mitigated by

Figure 4 (far left). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; The Sky Bungalow, Vancouver, 1949. Aerial view. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 5 (left). The Sky Bungalow, Vancouver, 1949. The living room. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 6 (above). The Sky Bungalow, Vancouver, 1949. The dining room. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

10 December-January 1950-51, 12-14, and January 1952, 17-19, respectively; in 1952, *Canadian Homes and Gardens* also published his Jake Ingram house of 1946 under the caption "They Built for a Good Long Future ... Even today it's as modern as Canadian TV" (September 1952, 26-27).

11 Among many personal testimonies of Hollingsworth's able provision of attractive home environments is that of my colleague Dr. Maureen Ryan, who was brought up in a Neoteric-type house in West Vancouver.

12 Hollingsworth's success with the Modernist idiom—completing at least 84 houses through his career—calls into question Robin Ward's opinion that the movement gained limited popular support in Vancouver, as quoted in Gordon Fulton's review of Kalman's *A History of Canadian Architecture*, in *SSAC Bulletin* 20, no. 1 (March 1995): 23.

13 Kenneth Reid, "The Private House," in Paul Zucker, ed., *New Architecture and City Planning, A Symposium* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 54.

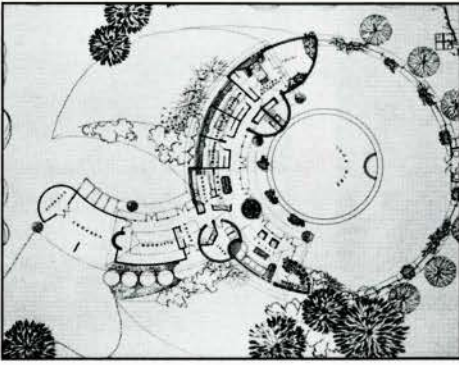
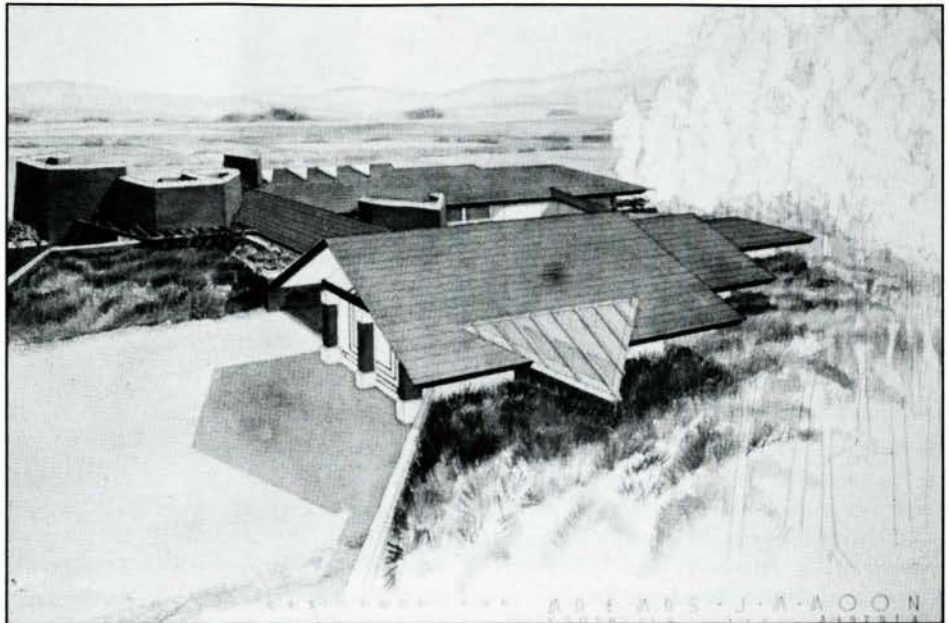


Figure 8 (right). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; "Residence for Mr. & Mrs. J.M. Moon," Foothills, Alberta, 1979. Presentation drawing. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 9 (above). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; Richard Trethewey house, Abbotsford, B.C., 1960. Site and floor plan. (F.T. Hollingsworth)



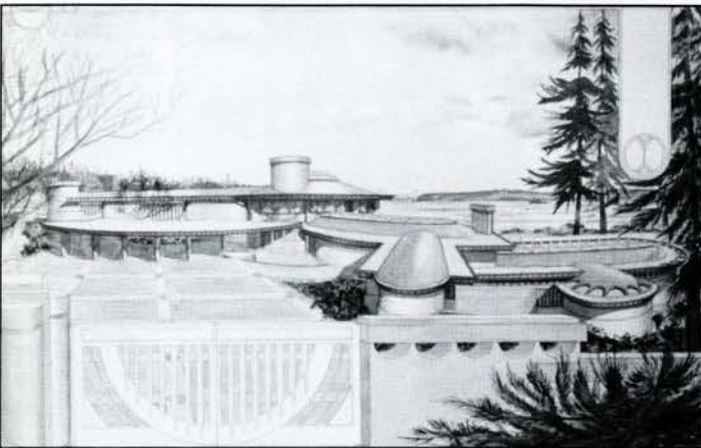
the introduction of objects of personal worth.¹⁴ The potential for individuality and variety was further expressed in the dining area, on the other side of the fireplace wall (figure 6 and cover). There, space-vista more than space-wall was apparent in Hollingsworth's optical and psychological exploitation of the pattern and texture of common materials. His ability to manipulate formal volumes so as to render them appropriate for specific activities, as well as evocative both literally and representationally, is alike evinced by turning to the galley kitchen. Herein, even the stainless steel splash guard, refrigerator, and utensils were arranged to perform efficiently, yet also act as aesthetically stimulating visual elements in the internal landscape.

The creative response to mundane factors is an adjunct to Hollingsworth's organic principles, and provides an explanation for the consistent syntax but diverse vocabulary of his subsequent work. The stimulus and constraint imposed by site, client, and budget, has, with increasing sophistication, been integrated with his concern for natural setting and materials, liberated but functionally defining space, and experientially enriching compositional devices. Those inform both the similarities and the differences between two houses he designed for Jack Moon, in 1950 and 1979. The first (figure 7; see page 44) was a flat-roofed, angular post-and-beam house comprised of two diagonally configured square volumes that created a counterpoint to a heavily treed plot in North Vancouver and a more intriguing internal spatial sequence than his conventional Neoteric. The second (figure 8) was an expansive brick and concrete structure with pitched roofs sheltering into the coppiced prairie declivities, completed in a suburb of Calgary. The larger budget for the second house permitted bigger volumes and more elegant ornamentation, nonetheless achieved through a comparable manipulation of form, plane, pattern, and texture.

Equally distinct are two British Columbia houses constructed on flat valley sites for Richard Trethewey, at Abbotsford in 1960 and at Haney in 1987. Their different geometries depended upon differences in program determined by family development. As younger parents in 1960 the Tretheweys wanted a pool. For it, Hollingsworth (then unaware of oriental precedent) inverted the idea of a roof, lining the economical circular excavation with asphalt. Its shape, rather than Wrightian precedent, established the arcs of primary living and sleeping areas, and of secondary parking, playing, and entry zones, with service facilities at their intersection (figure 9). The theme was carried through the interior articulation and decoration with conviction, but without dogmatism. Hollingsworth's adroit variation of homogeneous format and ornamental motifs was particularly effective in the unobtrusively but centrifugally positioned kitchen. It overlooked the play areas and was accessible to the living and entertaining rooms. The appliances and extensive built-in storage units and counter tops were arranged to save space and labour so that it could function as the command centre of the modern servantless family.

The significance of place in making place—that is, a place for people and

14 From the typescript of an article entitled "Design in Modern Life," dating from about 1937, in the Coates archive, box 6, file 6, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. Coates predicted that it would soon be "held as unreasonable" to pay to move heavy furniture as to move central heating systems from house to house, "leaving for the personal touch such portables as textiles, books, clothing, pictures and crockery."



peopled place—is most dramatically exhibited in four commissions spanning the past two decades. Compare the spreading, stolidly massed, slope-roofed Steven Stewart house, built in 1974 on an open site above Provo, Utah—for a Wright enthusiast, hence the references to Taliesin West—with the compact, rhythmically composed Mr. and Mrs. Ascher Smith house, carved into a confined plot (replete with swimming pool) in West Vancouver in 1990. Quite different again is the house he conceived in 1987 for Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Malmgren (completed in 1988), who also greatly admired the architecture of Lloyd Wright (**figure 10**). Thus, he fabricated a beautiful series of cross-axially disposed spaces attuned to the Malmgren's love of music and entertaining.¹⁵ Those patterns of living and recreation are accommodated within a fabric at once cleverly modulated onto a treed cul-de-sac in Burnaby, impressively homogeneous in form, and yet relatively modest in building. The generating design solutions are coherent through to the detailing. For example, in the pellucid living-dining wing the ceiling beams are resolved into the tripartite brick motif and monogrammed concrete mantle of the fireplace, and are matched by the elegant butting of brick, wood, and glass along the side walls (**figure 11**).

Such subtle sensibility became monumental in his most recent house, commissioned by a Vancouver contractor/developer (**figure 12**). Constructed into the shelving rock of a large plot in West Vancouver, the bedroom and living zones undulate like the ocean swell below, flowing down to the handsome internal pool. The water of the pool mimics the nearby sea, thereby contributing to a fascinating visual dialogue between natural and artificial form and material that recurs through each element of the house. Variations upon the topography-inspired curved form abound in two and three dimensions, beginning at the street entry gate and continuing to the stepped entrance and etched glass doors, through the magnificent living room (its curving shape complemented by the abstract geometries of the carpet in a Modernist echo of Robert Adam), and beyond to the terrace mediation between building and setting (**figure 13**). Beneath the superb finishes and custom furnishings, chiefly designed by Hollingsworth and facilitated by a generous patron, persist the creative, empathetic design principles and strategies that informed his earliest, economical, architecture.¹⁶

Figure 10 (top left). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Malmgren house, Burnaby, B.C., 1987-88. Exterior view. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 11 (top right). Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Malmgren house, Burnaby, B.C., 1987-88. The living room. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 12 (bottom left). F.T. Hollingsworth, architect; house in West Vancouver, 1991-93. Presentation drawing. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

Figure 13 (bottom right). House in West Vancouver, 1991-93. Exterior view of the terrace. (F.T. Hollingsworth)

¹⁵ Since entering independent practice in 1958, Hollingsworth has asked each client to fill out a detailed questionnaire about his or her lifestyle, interests, and values.

¹⁶ The interior decoration was completed with the designer Robert Ledingham. Hollingsworth has always sought to involve talented designers and craftspersons in his commissions, where budget has allowed.

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