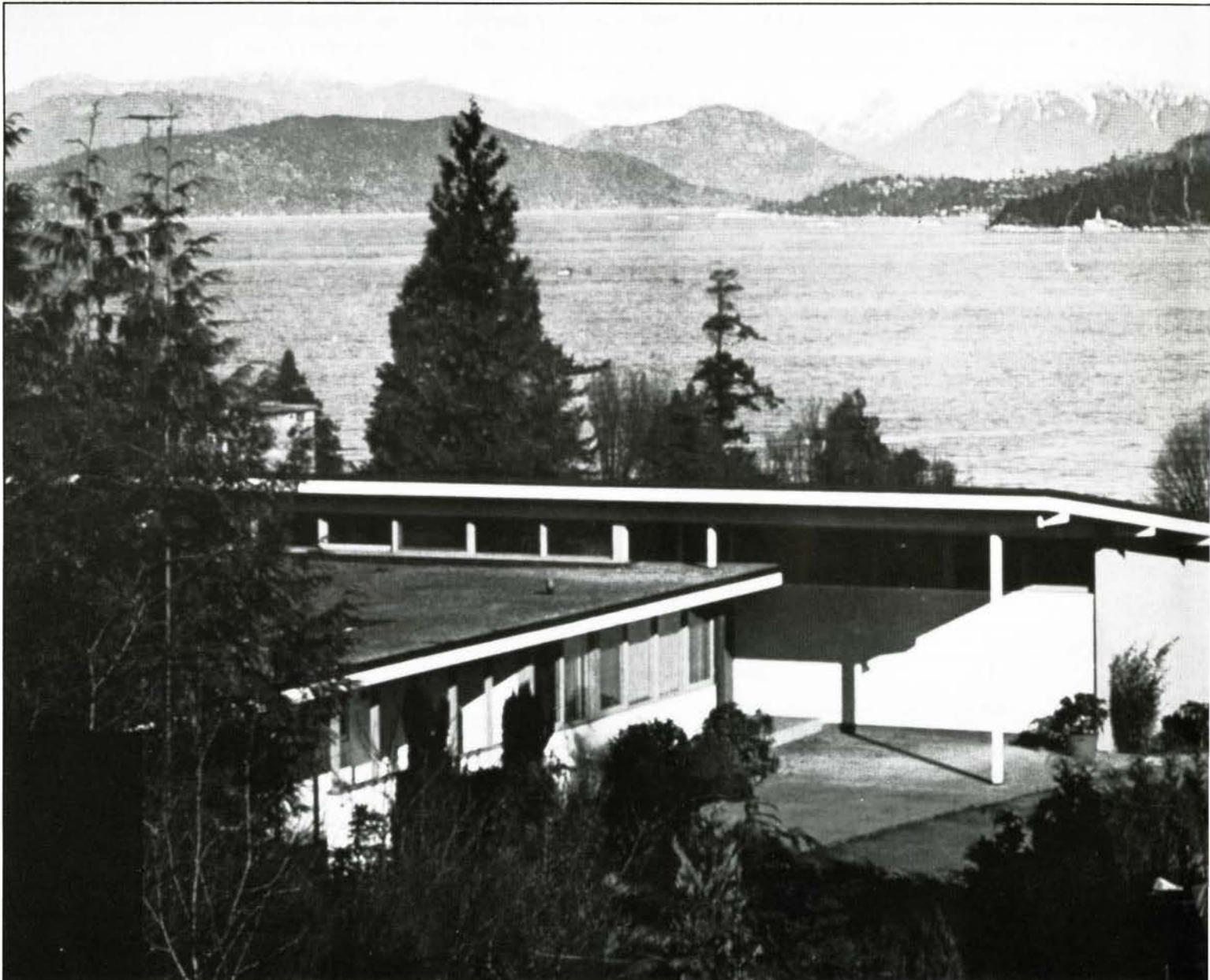


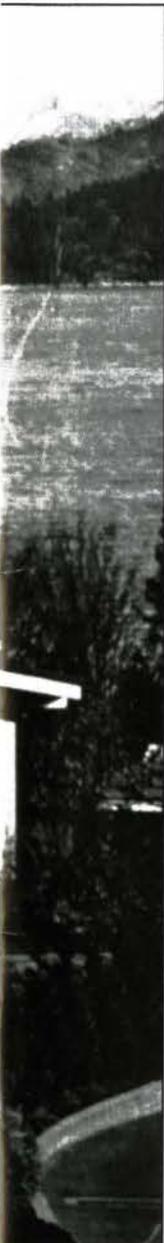
Modes of Modernizing: Modernist Design

B Y R H O D R I W I N D S O R



The Acquisition of in Canada

L I S C O M B E



The means by which Canadian – and indeed international – architects acquired an understanding of Modernist design is more assumed than researched.¹ The issue is highly complex since it embraces a range of factors from the educational policy or educative competence of faculty in the schools of architecture, to the intellectual, technical, and creative competence of the individual students, to the disparate nature of Modernist theory and practice. However, the main lines of that process can be summarized by reference to the self-directed learning and institutional training undertaken by those Canadian architects who began practice on the West Coast during the decade following the Second World War.

The choice of British Columbia, and especially Vancouver, as the geographical focus – and to a lesser extent of residential design as the typological focus – is determined by the speedier acceptance of Modernist values there than elsewhere in Canada.² This resulted from the economy and population's considerable expansion after 1946, and from the fact that for many, architects included, British Columbia afforded a more habitable climate and more liberal cultural environment in which to experiment with progressive design principles demonstrably relevant to a "baby-boom" society.³ The recounted experiences of members of that generation of architects, a brief analysis of their work, and an investigation of related documentary material form the basis of this interim study.⁴

Figure 19. Nathan Nemetz residence, Vancouver, designed in 1948 by John Porter and Catherine Chard Wisnicki. (Post and Beam [Vancouver: B.C. Lumber Assn., 1960], cover)

for John Bland

Figure 1 (above). The B.C. Research Council Building, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, designed by C.J. Thompson with C.E. Pratt and R.A.D. Berwick, 1947. (R. Windsor Liscombe, 1994)

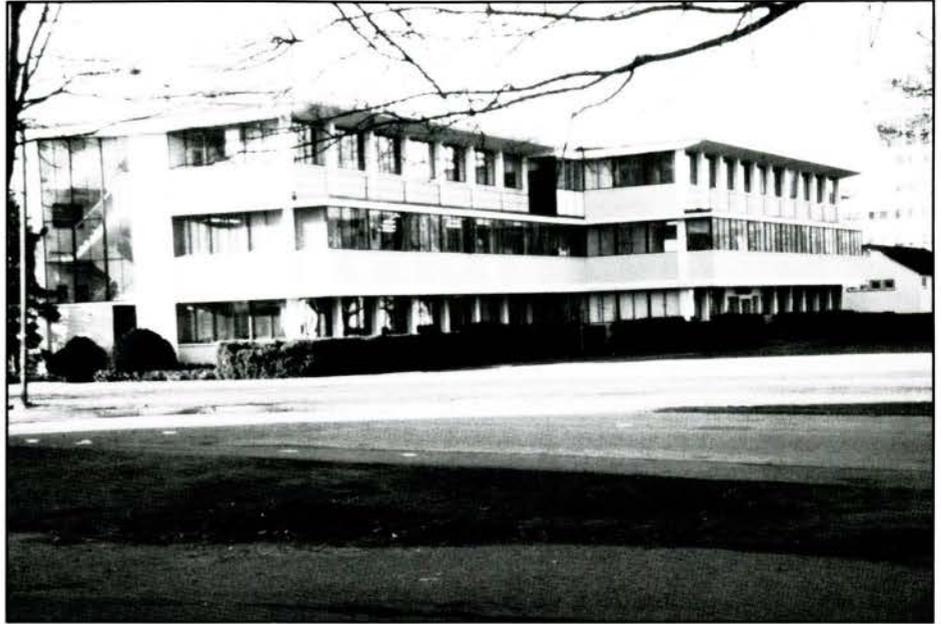


Figure 2 (below). The Hebb Physics Addition, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, designed by Richard Archambault under the supervision of Roy Jessiman, 1956. (R. Windsor Liscombe, 1994)



These sources yield interesting results that challenge aspects of the conventional interpretation of Western Canadian and Modernist architectural history. Firstly, West Coast Modernism developed less from regional imperatives than from the local application of essentially international ideas and imagery during what might be termed the “stoical phase” of Modernism in British Columbia, between demobilization and the Vancouver recession of 1960-61. That is not to undervalue either the primary influence of site and climate or the notable talents of native architects, exemplified by naming but five from the period: Bill Birmingham, C.E. “Ned” Pratt, Fred Hollingsworth, Arthur Erickson, and Barry Downs. Rather, it is to state that most architects of that generation appreciated the Modernist interest in accommodating regional and local cultural factors, and believed that the tenets of international Modernism offered a valid means to express personal and even national aspirations, as was the case in contemporary Canadian abstract art.⁵

Secondly, the comprehension of Modernism by architectural faculty and students depended as much upon visual as theoretical material. In the same manner, Modernist theory was less a homogeneously defined set of principles than a diverse body of part-ethical and part-aesthetic objectives given renewed relevance by post-war Reconstruction.⁶ Thirdly, illustrations of European and American Modernist design in professional and other journals

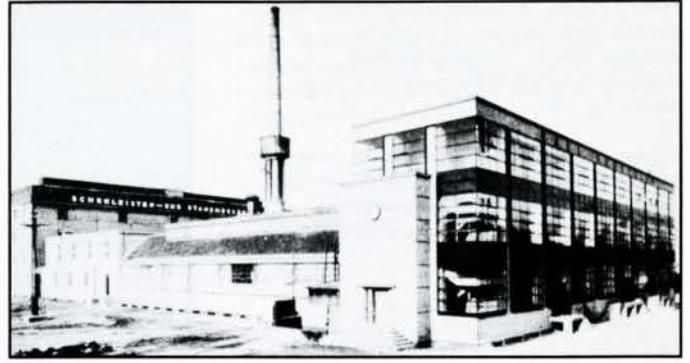


Figure 3 (left). The van Nelle coffee, tea, and tobacco factory at Rotterdam, designed by Brinkman and van der Vlugt, 1928-30. (*The International Style: Architecture since 1922* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932]).

Figure 4 (right). The Fagus shoe-last factory at Alfeld, designed by Gropius and Meyer, 1911. (*Art in America*, January/February 1979).

were cited by designers as having influenced them. This not only underscores the continuing significance of the published image in the currency of architectural practice, but anticipates the necessary concerns of B.C. architects with geographical setting and the use of local materials, especially wood. Fourthly, while the contribution of locally-born and -trained architects was very substantial, the development of West Coast Modernism depended significantly upon the immigration of architects and ideas inspired by the transatlantic Modernist movement; British Columbia artist B.C. Binning, for example, became a leading proponent of Modernism and built his pioneering West Coast Modern house (1940) after studying with Ozenfant and being enthused by Modernist British and European design.⁷

Two buildings erected on the fast-growing campus of the University of British Columbia manifest the broad acceptance of the abstract functionalist values at the core of early 20th-century Modernism: the B.C. Research Council Building, begun in 1947 to the designs of C.J. Thompson (until the early 1940s a staunchly Arts-and-Crafts-cum-Gothicist), assisted by C.E. Pratt and R.A.D. Berwick (figure 1); and the Hebb Physics Addition of 1956 by Richard Archambault, working under the supervision of Roy Jessiman as Thompson, Berwick and Pratt's partner in charge of the university's architecture (figure 2). The exposed reinforced concrete structure and equally austere functional brick and steel frame window infill of the B.C. Research Council Building correspond with the stoical efficiency of between-the-wars Dutch Modernism, epitomized by Brinkman and van der Vlugt's widely-illustrated van Nelle coffee, tea, and tobacco factory at Rotterdam (1928-30) (figure 3). Similarly, the Hebb Physics Addition clearly reveals that Archambault and Jessiman had studied such canonic works as Gropius and Meyer's Fagus shoe-last factory at Alfeld (1911) and had comprehended the new concepts of design it embodied (figure 4). It is the inspiration, not the imposition, of Modernist imagery and associated ideology that is readily apparent in these Canadian university buildings.

The adaptive nature of such West Coast architecture reflects the relatively small number of Canadian Modernists who, until the mid-1950s, had actually travelled to the European or North American sources. Among those who had was Archambault. Funded by the progressively inclined British Pilkington Glass Company, he went to study in Britain and on the continent in 1956. There had been a few others before the war, notably during the 1930s: University of Toronto School of Architecture graduates Fred Lasserre (graduated 1934) and J.B. Parkin (graduated 1935), who worked in Britain; Peter Thornton, a native of Western Canada, who was trained at the Architectural Association in London from 1934 to 1938. Later exceptions included Jessiman and John Porter, on war service, and Arthur Erickson, intent upon visiting the renowned architecture of the 1951 Festival of Britain in London but redirected to unlearning some of the Modernist dogma on a two-year tour of the Mediterranean basin.⁸

A majority of architects had not ventured abroad; indeed, they had attended architectural schools with fundamentally Beaux-Arts typed programmes. Harold Semmens and Douglas Simpson, the acknowledged leaders of advanced Modernism in Vancouver through the early 1950s, had graduated just before the outbreak of war from the University of Manitoba, when it was under the direction of the conservatively-inclined Milton Osborne and John Russell (himself a graduate of the Beaux-Arts era at M.I.T. in Cambridge, Massachusetts). The annual curricula printed in the university calendars through the 1930s disclose no real alteration to accommodate Modernist thought or process.⁹ Yet, without benefit of specific Modernist education or exposure, Semmens and Simpson were to be responsible for such early icons of Vancouver Modernism as the adeptly synthesized Miesian/Corbusian Marwell Office Building (1950-51), recipient of a 1952 Massey Gold Medal and signal of the acknowledged pre-eminence of B.C. Modernism in the post-war decade (figure 5).¹⁰

Figure 5 (above). Interior view of the Marwell Office Building, Vancouver; Semmens and Simpson, architects, 1950-51. (Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada [JRAIC] 35, no. 4 [April 1958]: 136)

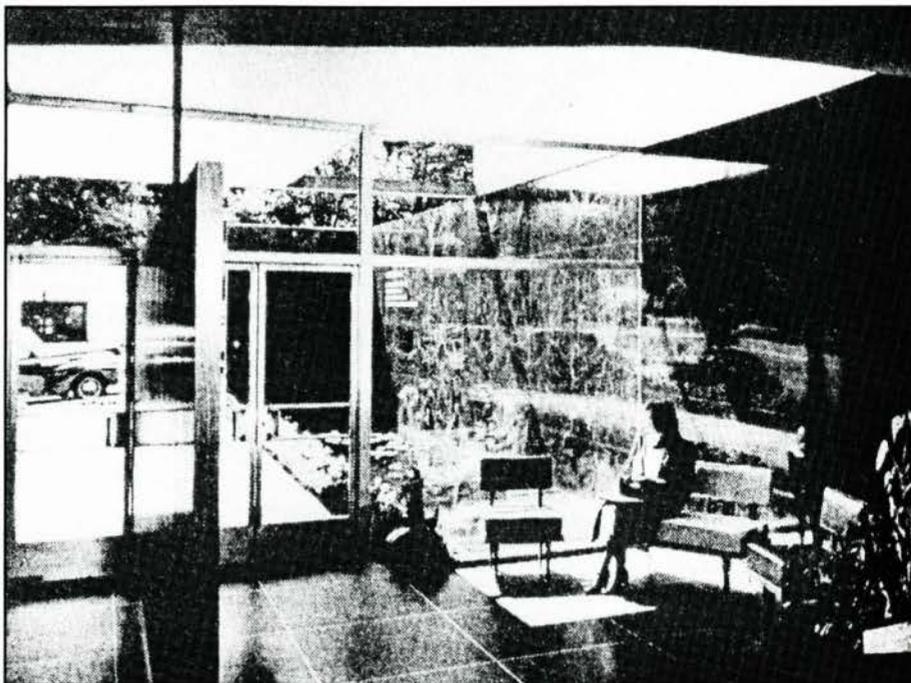


Figure 6 (below). The Buchanan Building, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1955-57; Zoltan Kiss, project architect, under the supervision of Roy Jessiman of Thompson, Berwick and Pratt. (U.B.C. Special Collections)



Clearly, Semmens and Simpson had attained beyond the confines of academe a thorough understanding of Modernist principles fully as accomplished as that of the Hungarian-born and -trained Zoltan Kiss, who was project architect at Thompson, Berwick and Pratt under Jessiman for the more derivative Miesian Buchanan Building at U.B.C. (1955-57) (figure 6). It was designed nearly six years after Kiss had emigrated from Hungary (and three years after joining Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, that nursery of Vancouver Modernism), where he trained at the Bauhaus-influenced Technical University of Budapest (following Peter Kafka, who also emigrated to Vancouver), and, thereby, was more directly aware of the extensive Modernist design in central Europe.

However, the correspondence between post-war Vancouver and prewar European Modernist design is, as indicated by the foregoing, more general than specific, and adaptive rather than imitative. In this respect, the young Canadian designers comprehended an essential principle of the Modernist polemic, for the leading proponents eschewed stylistic categorization and formulaic doctrine. "Form is not the aim of our work, but only the result,"

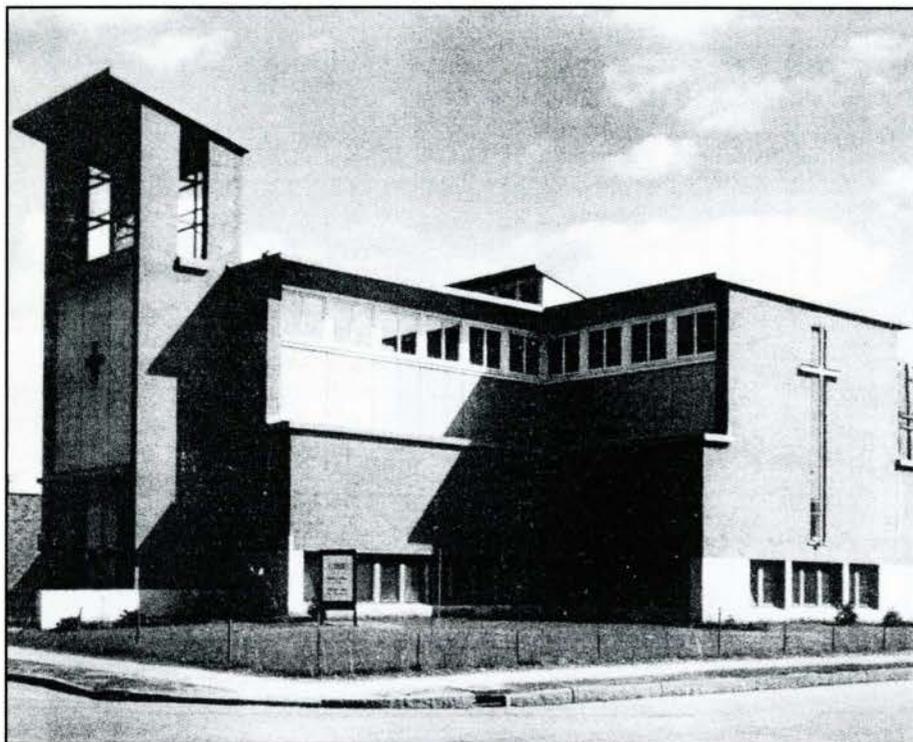


Figure 7. St. Cuthbert's Anglican Church, Town of Mount Royal, Montréal, built 1946-47; Frederic Lasserre, architect, with Wolfgang Gerson and Rolf Duschenes, associate architects. (JRAIC 28, no. 1 [January 1951]: 9)

Mies van der Rohe had declared in 1923, while Gropius wrote twelve years later that the Bauhaus represented “not the invention of a new system of architectural education ... but rather the relation of architecture to the evolving world which is implied by that system.”¹¹ Clear in their own comprehension of objective and means, Gropius and Mies underestimated the imitative predilection of architectural practice and the tendency of formal education to codify and to detach example from principle.

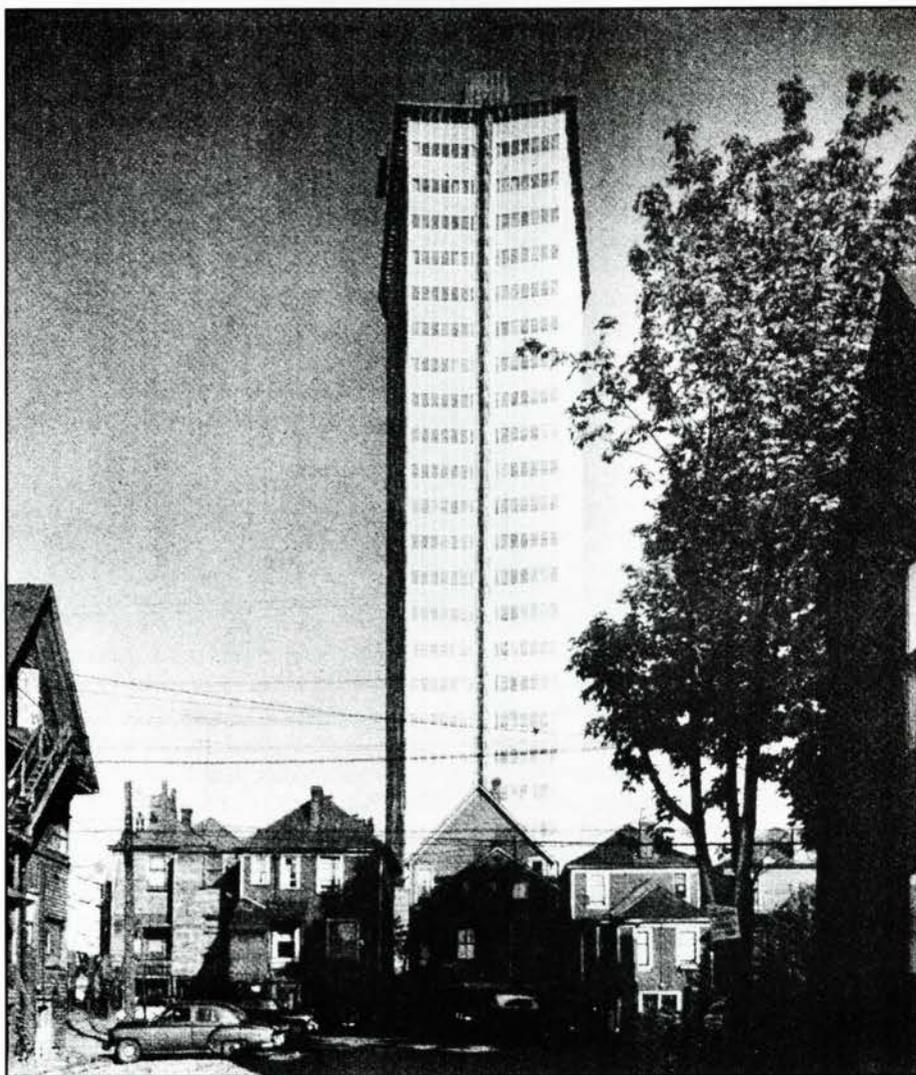
Nevertheless, the comparison between the Marwell office and Buchanan Building does serve to introduce two factors germane to the theme of how Modernism was learned in Canada. The first is the substantive impact of those trained outside the province, necessarily in the absence of an architectural school on the West Coast, and of those who emigrated from overseas or migrated from eastern North America. Of the former, Berwick, Birmingham, and Pratt, although each B.C.-born, graduated from the University of Toronto, respectively in 1935, 1938, and 1939. Here they had been initiated into some Modernist lore by Eric Arthur, who, after 1935, led the reform—or modernization—of architectural education in Canada, despite never being appointed head. C.B.K. Van Norman moved to B.C. in 1935 upon graduating from the University of Manitoba ahead of Semmens, Simpson, and, in 1954, Jessiman. No less remarkable were the alumni of McGill (where Lasserre taught briefly in 1945-46): Catherine Chard (Wisnicki), 1943; Duncan McNab, 1941; John Porter, 1941; M.C. Utley and Arthur Erickson, 1951; and H. Peter Oberlander, 1945.

Oberlander also studied at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, as did Geoffrey Massey and Abraham Rogatnick, two more easterners who, like the artist Lawren Harris, were in the words of Erickson “seekers of a new life.”¹² Oberlander, furthermore, had been among those who quitted National Socialist Germany yet were interned in Canada, together with Wolfgang Gerson and Rolf Duschenes; in 1944, they teamed up with Lasserre to design the pioneering Modernist St. Cuthbert's Anglican Church, erected in the Town of Mount Royal, Montréal (figure 7). In company with Oberlander, Gerson would embark upon a distinguished teaching career at the universities of Manitoba, from 1946 to 1956, and British Columbia, there becoming a colleague of both Oberlander and Lasserre.¹³

Also from European and/or British training—Gerson attended the Architectural Association in London between 1936 and 1939—came Francis Donaldson, Kenneth Gardner, Michael Garrett, Asbjord Gathe, Gerald Hamilton, Warnett Kennedy, Christopher Owtram, John Peeps, Wilfrid Ussner, and Harold Weinrich. An equally incomplete list of engineer-designers would include John Read, Paul Wisnicki, and, most importantly, given their respective contributions to such major commissions as the B.C. Electric head office (1955-57) and main branch of the Vancouver Public Library (1956-57), Otto Safir and Per Kristoffersen (figures 8, 9, and cover). Several, like Garrett, were drawn by the reputation of

Figure 8 (right). The main branch of the Vancouver Public Library, 1956-57; Semmens and Simpson, architects; Per Kristoffersen, engineer. (JRAIC 35, no. 4 [April 1958]: 141)

Figure 9 (below right). B.C. Electric Building, 1955-57; Thompson, Berwick and Pratt, architects; Otto Safir, engineer. (JRAIC 35, no. 4 [April 1958]: 121)



B.C. architecture or, like Wells Coates, University of B.C. engineering graduate and founding Modernist, by specific projects such as Alcan's new town at Kitimat in northern B.C., originally thought (by Massey for one) to promise comparison with the German *Siedlung*. Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse (1933/35), and contemporary British New Towns.¹⁴

The second factor germane to how Modernism was learned in Canada is the importance of the McGill connection, both professionally and historically. It was not merely the long-term consequence of Lasserre's acceptance of the post of head of the School of Architecture, founded at the University of B.C. in 1946-47.¹⁵ Nor was it simply the fact that Erickson and other McGill graduates would put their training under John Bland to signal effect.¹⁶ It was also because Chard, McNab, and Porter had participated in the 1938 student mutiny at McGill against the historicist (albeit of an Arts and Crafts tenor) curriculum and examination system.¹⁷ One result of the mutiny was the appointment of Bland, a recent graduate of the A.A., as McGill lecturer in 1939, acting director in 1940, and director from 1941. There he created a progressive Modernist course of study and gathered a talented international faculty that included another A.A. graduate, Harold Spence-Sales, the English planner, and Canadian architects Hazen Size and Watson Balharrie.

Furthermore, the period 1937-38 can be regarded as pivotal to serious ideological change in Canadian architectural thought. At that juncture the profession began to digest what John Lyle had in 1932 already termed the "tonic medicine" of Modernism, even if, as Mackenzie Waters (designer of the accomplished Modernist "The Deck" at Elgin House on Lake Joseph, Muskoka, Ontario, 1937-38) stated pointedly in a 1936 CBC radio broadcast, those in need had to turn to Europe "because the new architecture is practically non-existent in Canada and with the exception of a very few men almost equally in the United States."¹⁸ A small dose of Modernist tonic had been administered to the Architectural Club at Toronto University in the Fall of 1937 by Phyllis Cook, who, armed with slides of her European tour (and with fellow students Berwick, Birmingham, and Pratt probably in attendance), lectured on "Modern Architecture."¹⁹

The means by which that change occurred can be discerned through close examination of the dominant modes of learning then available to the architectural student:

- › *didactic*, institutional training or, less frequently, articling with a firm (the genesis, in the office of Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, of both Hollingsworth and Ron Thom);
- › *literary*, chiefly the theoretical or historio-critical books;
- › and *professional*, the journals and magazines covering current practice.

In 1937-38, as already stated, the didactic remained academic, essentially Beaux-Arts, with the partial exception of the University of Toronto. Even Peter Thornton at the A.A. had been required to memorize celebrated historical edifices in plan, section, and detail. Although befriended by Marcel Breuer briefly in England before joining Gropius at Harvard in 1937, Thornton updated traditional English framing in his thesis project design to formulate the quasi-Modernist post-and-beam system he would utilize in the house he designed for his mother at Caulfield, West Vancouver, upon returning to B.C. in 1938.²⁰

After the academic year 1940-41, Bland, aided by the place of the McGill school in the Faculty of Engineering and encouraged by the university president, Dr. Cyril James, moved somewhat more speedily than Eric Arthur toward a Bauhaus-informed five-year architectural curriculum, to be adapted by Lasserre and later by John Russell. Bland retrospectively summarized the contents and objectives of the curriculum in an article printed in the July 1960 issue of the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* (to which I have added comments):

We give them fundamental mathematics and physics for analytical work and for training their minds. We give them rather a lot of history of architecture to show them the solid remains of the civilizations that have produced our thought and feeling [note the emphasis on broad cultural rather than archaeological study]. We teach them to draw [Arthur Lismar and Gordon Webber (a pupil of Moholy-Nagy at the Chicago Bauhaus) both taught a compressed version of the "Vorkurs" through the 1950s] and we teach practice in building construction because above all we believe architecture is fundamentally good building [the early post-war faculty included such admirers of Le Corbusier as Watson Balharrie and Hazen Size] We teach that design evolves from construction, exploring how space can be built for human use and finally how space can not only be built well to meet social needs usefully [sociology was inserted into the programme from 1943] but also meaningfully which is perhaps the real creed of architecture.²¹

Therein Bland neatly defined the Modernist ethos as understood by the post-war generation of B.C. architects, according to their published or spoken views.

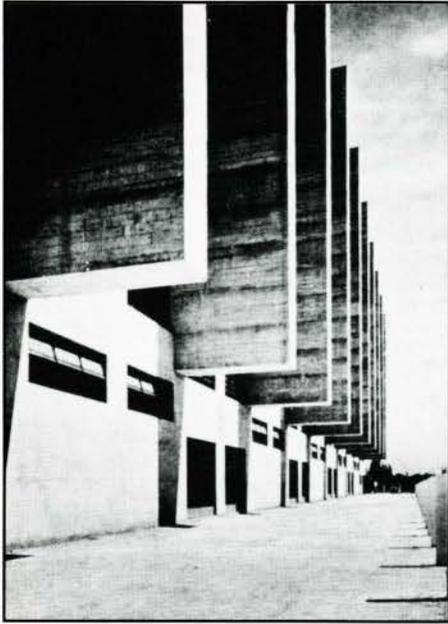
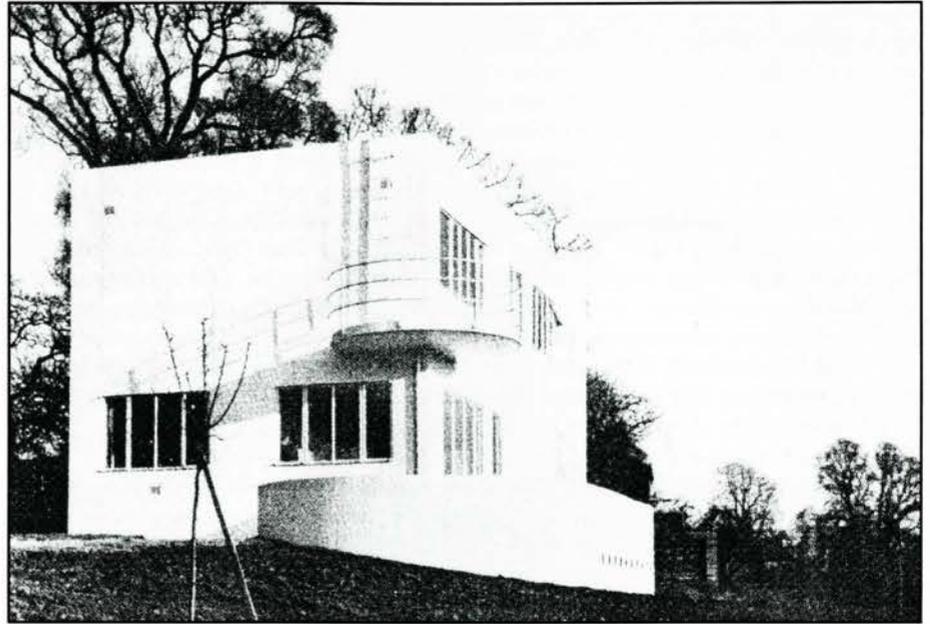


Figure 10 (above). Side view of Wembley Swimming Pool, designed by Owen Williams, 1936. (*Architectural Review*, 1938)

Figure 11 (right). The house designed by Serge Chermayeff near Rugby, England, completed in 1936. (*JRAIC* 13, no. 4 [April 1936]: 73)



Yet, this is to beg a host of questions which are, and were, implicit in the other primary means of learning about Modernism available to that generation: the published theoretical and polemical literature. The diversity contained deeper within a superficially homogeneous Modernist theory is reflected in the divergent architectural interpretation of Modernism, even in the relatively small temporal and geographical confines of the post-war decade in B.C. One explanation, which tended to perpetuate allegiance to the balder aphorisms and motifs, is the noticeable imprecision about effects, not less than methods, in the language of Modernist theory. An obvious example is the profession's advocacy of internationalism and the architect's pre-eminent place in fabricating a new society simultaneously with the endorsement of democratic humanism and regional consciousness.²²

Those philosophically unresolved polarities were just as evident in 1937-38, if excused as being the inevitable concomitant of the reforming dynamic. With Eric Arthur (by now established as editor of the *R.A.I.C. Journal* and professor of architectural design at the University of Toronto), Modernist ideology and design received increasing exposure, though not entirely clear explication. Thus, in the June 1938 *Journal*, Arthur reprinted Lasserre's article entitled "Modern Architecture: The New Aesthetics and Cement."²³ In it, Lasserre drew chiefly upon his experience in the office of Berthold Lubetkin's Tecton firm, and as layout designer for the M.A.R.S. (Modern Architecture Research Group)²⁴ exhibition in London that year. While Lasserre argued that Modernism comprised a set of principles and a process of design rather than a style—being concentrated upon the satisfaction of practical, economic, and cultural function through the integration of industry and technology—he also declared, with particular reference to a side view of Owen Williams' 1936 Wembley Swimming Pool, that it embraced the "Drama and excitement produced by the introduction of new forms and the association of new materials" (figure 10).²⁵

A comparable superficial cohesion masking an underlying ideological division exists between the most widely used Modernist texts, the 1927 English translation of Le Corbusier's 1923 *Vers une architecture*, Bruno Taut's *Modern Architecture* of 1927, Walter Gropius's *The new Architecture and the Bauhaus* of 1935, and Siegfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* of 1941. It also exists within their texts, particularly in Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*. Corbusier's argument—albeit relevant to this country by virtue of its often overlooked Canadian content: an ubiquitous grain elevator from Fort William and a view along the deck of the Canadian Pacific *Empress of France*—is riddled with veritable Blakean aphorisms and discourses as much upon mythic, even mystical, as mechanistic or materialist values. Hence, the association of his deeply humanistic and complex concept of design with such deliberately contracted phrases as "A house is a machine for living in," and the general over-simplification of the Modernist argument for the humanization of technology by its aesthetic integration into contemporary conditions of living.

Seasoned supporters (in the intellectual or practical sense) of Modernism contributed to the confusion of its aims, perhaps the most celebrated being Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, who mounted the 1932 exhibition *The International Style*:

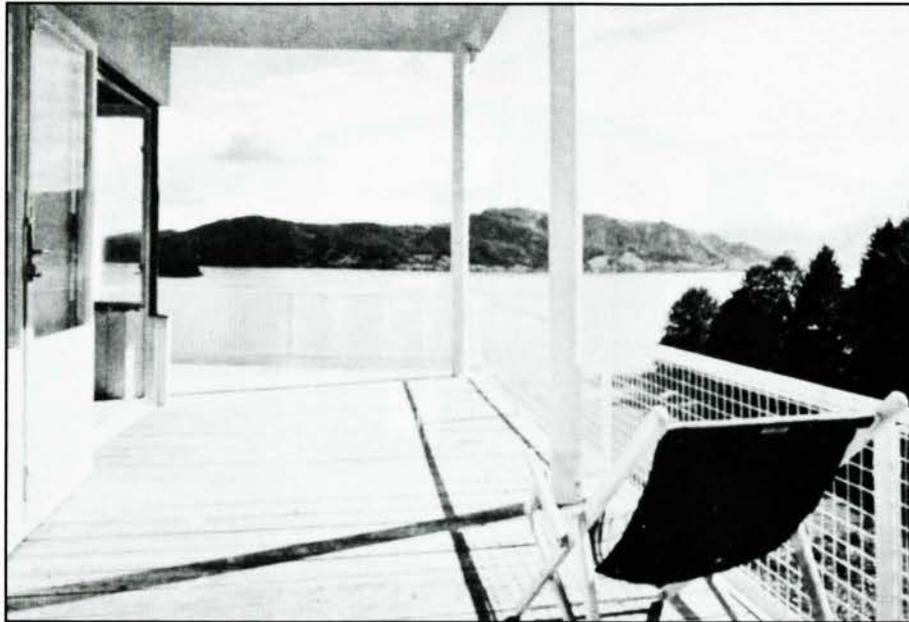


Figure 12. Ernst Plischke's villa on the shores of Lake Atter, Austria, 1936. (*L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, mars 1937)

Architecture since 1922 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.²⁶ They cast the movement in terms of a style, seeking to circumvent opposition to the exhibition from the professional and dilettante establishments. Consequently, they ignored the considerable differences of conception, intention, and execution between buildings selected for exhibition or illustration, implying that, say, Ludvik and Kysela's Bata Shoe Store, Prague, 1929, or Mies's Tugendhat house, Brno, 1931, embodied their tripartite definition of Modernism: "volume rather than mass ... regularity rather than axial symmetry ... [and the proscription of] arbitrarily applied decoration."²⁷

Mies might quip in later years, "I read a few good books – and that's about it," but the diffuse nature of the book literature explains why Catherine Chard Wisnicki and no doubt most of her peers instead learned much if not most about Modernism from the magazines.²⁸ To her, the best was *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, though, as a student, she also regularly perused the *American Architect and Architecture* and its successor, the *Architectural Record*, the British *Architectural Review*, and, once resident in B.C., the much admired Californian *Arts and Architecture*.

Through 1937-38 those magazines and the *R.A.I.C. Journal*—from 1938, "current magazines" were required reading in Eric Arthur's Elements of Architectural Form course—did present a comprehensive picture, or series of images, of Modernist design. According to Chard Wisnicki, the magazines facilitated her understanding of a number of Modernist objectives. One she described as the intellectual challenge thrown down by Le Corbusier to fabricate a relevant form for the epoch, and his sense of the profound meaning that could be imported through the disposition of space. Another was the goal of an integrated welding of material, structure, and purpose desired by Gropius and Mies. A third was the formal and structural logic and the variety of space and scale achieved by the Dutch Modernists. And a fourth aim was the transformation of functional and technological factors into humanistic and naturalized buildings attained by Alvar Aalto. The photographs in the magazines were not infrequently both striking and evocative of the attitudes and aspirations that had determined their appearance.

Each of these issues seems to be present in the photograph of the presciently militaristic geometrical-functional house (much admired by Jessiman when a student) which Serge Chermayeff had completed outside Rugby in 1936, published by Eric Arthur in a 1938 *R.A.I.C. Journal* (figure 11); the use of presciently avers to the material and ideological ground-clearing for Modernism begun by the First and finished by the Second World War. Interestingly, Chermayeff's all-timber house at Halland, Sussex (1937-38)—essentially post-and-beam or proto-West Coast Modernist—was illustrated in J. McAndrew and E. Mock's popular Museum of Modern Art booklet *What is Modern Architecture?* (1946), as well as in J.M. Richard's *An Introduction to Modern Architecture* (1940), which became required summer reading at McGill from 1942. An even more powerful image of the stoical formalism and technological functionalism of mid-1930s Modernism was Chermayeff's I.C.I. Laboratory at Blackley, Manchester, England, extensively reported in the March 1938 issue of *Architectural Review*.

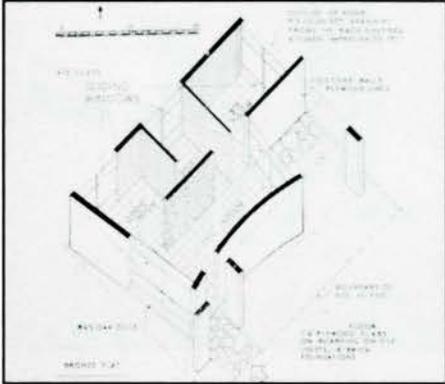
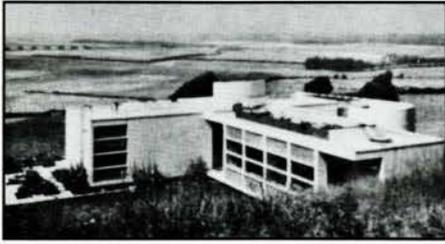


Figure 13 (above top). Berthold Lubetkin's country cottage at Whipsnade, 1933-36. (*L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, janvier 1938)

Figure 14 (above middle). Axonometric drawing of the model cottage, Royal West of England Show, 1936; Marcel Breuer and Maxwell Fry, architects. (*L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, janvier 1937)

Figure 15 (above). Chitty house at Churt, England, 1937; Anthony Chitty, architect. (*L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, janvier 1938)

Figure 16 (top right). The Mr. and Mrs. Hugo Simon residence at Ste-Rose, near Montréal, designed in 1942 by Wolfgang Gerson. (W. Gerson photo, c. 1943)

Figure 17 (bottom right). Timber house at Shipbourne, England; Gropius and Fry, architects, 1936. (*Architectural Review*, February 1938)



Of greater moment to the early post-war development of West Coast domestic architecture were the photographs of landscape-responsive and wood-constructed Modernist houses published in the magazines. The photograph of Chermayeff's Rugby house chosen by Eric Arthur indicates how Modernism, contrary to conventional informed opinion, was intended to create a sympathetic relationship with landscape and nature. Modernist topographical, picturesque sensibility is clearest in the views of Ernst Plischke's villa on the shores of Lake Atter, Austria (figure 12), and of Lubetkin's country cottage at Whipsnade (figure 13), included respectively in the March 1937 and January 1938 issues of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*. This journal also published the site-conscious work of Neutra, Aalto, and the rather overlooked English, Russian, and German emigre architects active in 1930s British Palestine.²⁹

In addition, the editors published images of several landscape-related wood frame houses. In January 1937 they showed Breuer and Maxwell Fry's Royal West of England Show model cottage (figure 14), fascinating for its compact, liberated space as well as its blend of natural and modern artificial materials. In October 1938 they printed a photograph of Anthony Chitty's post-and-beam house at Churt, England (figure 15). This house prefigured Wolfgang Gerson's Hugo Simon house at Ste-Rose near Montréal (1942), which became a place of pilgrimage for Bland's early students, including Chard Wisnicki (figure 16).³⁰ In a broader context, the Chitty house anticipated B.C. developments, along with

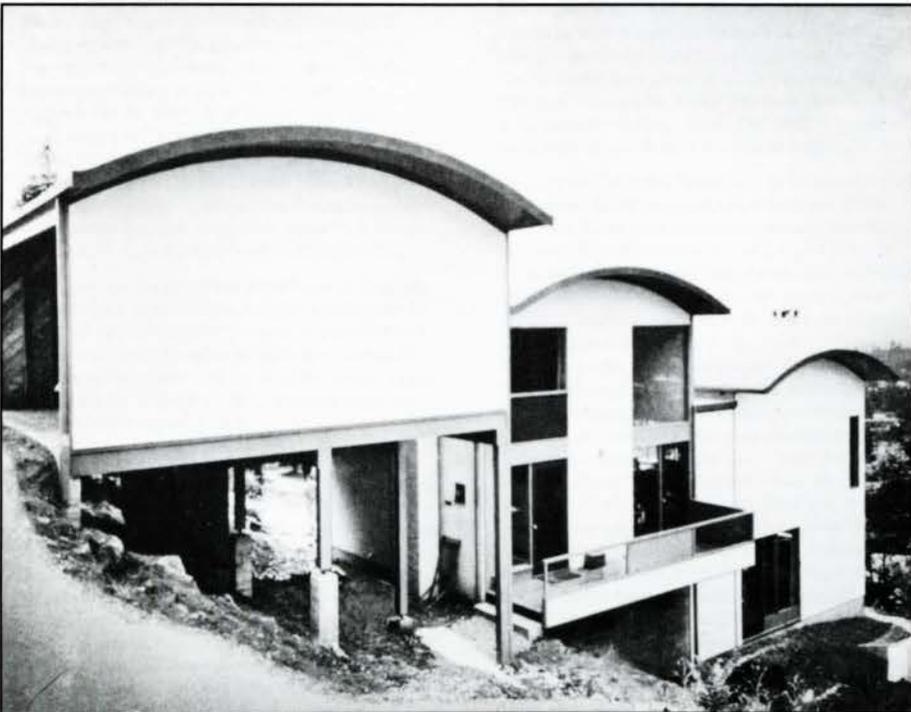


Figure 18 (above). House at Richmond Shore, California; William Wurster, architect, 1937. (Architectural Record 83, no. 1 [January 1938])

Figure 20 (top left). The Oberlander residence, Vancouver, 1958; H. Peter Oberlander and Leon G. Dirassar, architects. (Western Homes and Living, August 1960, 21)

Figure 21 (middle left). The McNab residence, West Vancouver, 1957; Duncan McNab, architect. (JRAIC 35, no. 4 [April 1958]: 126)

Figure 22 (bottom left). The Wolfgang Gerson residence, West Vancouver, 1958; Wolfgang Gerson, architect. (Western Homes and Living, August 1960, 21)



Gropius and Fry's timber house at Shipbourne, England, reported in the February 1938 *Architectural Review* (figure 17). The procedures and product for a Modernist idiom attuned to the Pacific Northwest were vividly explicated by the photographs of contemporary California houses placed in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* and *Architectural Record*. The stunning triptych of houses published on one page of the January 1938 *Record* epitomized the celebration of the symbiotic unification of Modernist practice and natural setting achieved by Richard Neutra, Rudolf Schindler, and William Wurster (figure 18).³¹

The prestige of West Coast United States architects, especially Neutra, Wurster, Pietro Belluschi, John Funk, and Raphael Soriano (regularly illustrated in *Arts and Architecture*), would compound through the 1950s.³² Nevertheless, for Western Canadian Modernists the legacy of the transatlantic inspiration upon the formative process of Modernization just prior to the Second World War was significant. It is apparent in the Nathan Nemetz house, designed in 1948 by Porter and Chard Wisnicki (replacing the too-demanding Frank Lloyd Wright).³³ The shed roof spanning the living room and master bedroom, placed in front of the cross-axial rear service and bedroom wing in order to capitalize on the location, realigns the site slope to launch the gaze through the Mies-cum-Neutra glass walls across English Bay to the sublime North Shore mountains (figure 19; see pages 60-1).

THE USE OF NATURAL YET ECONOMICAL MATERIALS and the embrace of setting at the Nemetz house, plus the efficient and habitable plan, demonstrate the essential breadth of Modernist intent. They even foreshadow Ron Thom's comment "The landscape must win in the end."³⁴ And the legacy of transatlantic Modernism persisted in the conceptually consistent houses on diverse sites designed for themselves by Oberlander (1958) in Vancouver, and by McNab (1957) and Gerson (1958) in West Vancouver (figures 20, 21, 22). These houses variously exhibit the architectural and ideological stimuli of international Modernism to which a graduate of the University of Toronto School of Architecture humorously alluded in his brief fictitious valedictory for *Torontonensis* of 1939:

... came to varsity from London, resigning from Tecton Partnership with Lubetkin. Concrete Technician, Einstein Observatory, Erich Mendelsohn Arch., Collaborator. Lectured on International Design at Gropius' Bauhaus, Dessau, two years. Head draftsman for Le Corbusier, Paris, six years.³⁵

Endnotes

- 1 For example, the question is not discussed in the valuable study of Modernist design in Toronto compiled by Detlef Mertins, Marc Baraness, Ruth Cawker, Brigitte Shim, and George Kapelos, *Toronto Modern: Architecture 1945-1965* (Toronto: Bureau of Architecture and Urbanism and Coach House Press, 1987). The standard literature on Modernism, epitomized by the excellent books of William J.R. Curtis and Kenneth Frampton, respectively *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1991) and *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), is equally bereft of such an analysis. Some discussion of the broader issue of changes in professional and popular taste appears in Paul Greenhalgh, ed., *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion, 1990). The author is grateful to the archivists and librarians at the universities of British Columbia, Calgary, Manitoba, and Toronto for their assistance. A special debt of gratitude is owed to Kathy Zimon, Catherine Fraser, and Ouita Murray of the Canadian Architectural Archives at Calgary. Part of this research was funded under a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 2 The emergence of Modernism in Vancouver has been charted briefly by Harold Kalman, most recently in the third edition of *Exploring Vancouver* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993) written with Ron Phillips and Robin Ward, and by Douglas Shadbolt in "Post-war Architecture in Vancouver," in *Vancouver, Art and Artists, 1931-1983*, L. Rombout, ed. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983): 108-119. The existence of a distinct regional domestic Modernism is proposed by Sherry McKay, "Western Living, Western Homes," *SSAC Bulletin* 14, no. 3 (September 1989): 65-74. The broader influences upon B.C. architecture are outlined in Janine Bond, *University Endowment Lands Architecture 1940-1969* (Vancouver: Heritage Vancouver Society, 1993).
- 3 These developments are summarized in Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver, An Illustrated History* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1980) and Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke, eds., *Vancouver and its Region* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992). The socio-cultural context is recounted by A. Balkind, "On Ferment and Golden Ages," and by Arthur Erickson, "To Understand the City we Make," in *Vancouver Forum I: Old Powers, New Forces*, Max Wyman, ed. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992): 63-79, 146-159. A confluence of broader, chiefly professional, social and Modernist architectural values is argued by this author in "Schools for the 'Brave New World': The School Architecture of Thompson, Berwick and Pratt," *B.C. Studies* 90 (Summer 1991): 25-39, and "The Culture of Modernism: Vancouver's Public Libraries 1947-1957," *Architecture + Culture: The Proceedings of the International Research Symposium at Carleton University* (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1992): 358-361.
- 4 The author has discussed this period with the majority of the living members of the post-war generation who practised out of Vancouver, as well as those involved in construction and lumber manufacture, toward an exhibition, *Vancouver: The Spirit of Modernism*, organized under the auspices of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, to open in 1996.
- 5 Modernist concern with regional and ethnic factors was increasingly voiced at the post-war conferences of C.I.A.M., as recounted in S. Giedion, *A Decade of New Architecture* (New York, 1954), 1-2. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling Lubetkin's 1951 comment about the Spa Green Estate, London, 1949: "For too long, architectural solutions were regarded in terms of abstract principles, with formal expression left to itself as a functional resultant. The principles of composition, the emotional impact of the visual were brushed aside as irrelevant. Yet this is the very material with which the architect operates" Quoted in Anthony Jackson, *The Politics of Architecture: A History of Modern Architecture in Britain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 170. For B.C. Binning, Modernism was altogether more positive. In "The Artist and the Architect," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada [JRAIC]* 27, no. 9 (September 1950): 320-21, he wrote: "As for Canada, generally speaking it is only since the war that Artist and Architect have felt the need for new forms to express the new thought and feeling within our country." That dimension is studied in Denise Leclerc, *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992).
- 6 An obvious example of the ideological diversity within Modernist thought can be found in the contrasting views on the architect and society propounded by Karel Tiege and by Le Corbusier; see Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR: Theories and Projects for Moscow, 1928-1932* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991). In "The Case for a Theory of Modern Architecture," *R.I.B.A. Journal* 64 (June 1957): 307-18, John Summerson questioned the existence of a distinct Modernist theory. However, to most students from this period, Modernism seemed to afford a pragmatic and efficient approach to contemporary design problems. That interpretation is corroborated by the first issues of the University of Manitoba School of Architecture student magazine *Tecs and Decs*. E.W. Glesnek (with a typical assumption of theoretical clarity) wrote on the development of twentieth century architectural design in the 1948 issue: "Modern design provides integration of our mode of life with the planning of a building, integration between architects, artist, and sculptor. Modern design is clean, honest, devoid of falsity and imitation, is functional, beautiful, organic and integrated." The 1949 issue, moreover, underscores the general absence, among the first generation of Canadian Modernists at least, of intellectual obsequiousness; under a caricature of Le Corbusier's domestic architecture is the caption: "L.E. Korbyousae. Architect-Knailem Inc. Builders. Home of the Year."
- 7 Biography in Leclerc, 87-88; see also Shadbolt, 108-110.
- 8 Nevertheless, Erickson would comment of the house he designed with Geoffrey Massey in 1955 for Ruth Killam in West Vancouver (Massey Silver Medal, 1956): "Our design was a blend of Bauhaus formal concepts with West Coast sensibility to wood construction." Catalogue, Arthur Erickson Exhibition, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1966 (copy in the Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary).
- 9 Omitting the École des Beaux-Arts in Montréal, which maintained the French Beaux Arts system well into the 1950s, the university calendars demonstrate that the study of Modernist theory and design was introduced earliest at Toronto (from about 1933, according to Bill Birmingham), but without the more general change in academic initiated at McGill from 1940-41. The situation did not alter at Manitoba until after 1946, when John Russell (appointed Head only in 1948) was joined by Modernists such as Wolfgang Gerson. Architecture was, for example, still described as a "fine art" until 1945-46, when the architect was defined as a "planner and builder ... providing for human function." In terms of text books, Manitoba continued to recommend Bannister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* until 1954, when it was replaced by Talbot Hamlin's *Architecture Through the Ages* (New York: Putnam, 1951), which addressed the Modern movement. Even at McGill, the Modernist literature such as Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), F.R.S. Yorke and Colin Penn's *A Key to Modern Architecture* (London and Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1938), and J.M. Richard's *An Introduction to Modern Design* (London, 1940) was at first only included on the summer reading lists. At Toronto, F.R.S. Yorke's *The Modern House in England* (London: The Architectural Press, 1935) and Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* were on the course bibliography from 1940, although Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* was not included until 1945. Students obviously acquired their own collection of books and magazines, typified by Bill Birmingham subscribing to *Architectural Review* through the 1930s, or Roy Jessiman purchasing J. McAndrew and E. Mock's *What is Modern Architecture?* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946).
- 10 The renown quickly achieved by Vancouver Modernist design is further indicated by the organization in 1949 of an exhibition of recent West Coast work by the Architectural Society of the Toronto School under the direction of Ian MacLennan, and by the publication of an article on C.E. Pratt's Brooks house in West Vancouver (1946-47; demolished) in *Architectural Record* (October 1948): 97-101.
- 11 "Aphorisms on Architecture and Form," *G2* (1923), reprinted in Philip C. Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1978), 189, preceded by the sentence, "We refuse to recognize problems of form, but only problems of building." Gropius's statement comes from his *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, trans. P. Morton Shand (London, 1937), 7. See also his article "Toward a Living Architecture," *American Architect and Architecture* (January 1938): 21-22: "A true Modern architect, that is to say, an architect who tries to shape our new conception of life, who refuses to live by repeating the forms and ornaments of our ancestors, is constantly on the lookout for new means of enriching his design in order to enliven the starkness and rigour of the early examples of the architectonic revolution."
- 12 Erickson, *Vancouver Forum I*.
- 13 In an unpublished lecture dating from about 1945 and kindly made available by his widow, Gerson explained his admiration for Le Corbusier (and Modernist practice generally), stating that he had "succeeded in spreading the gospel of a truly new plastic art, based on the technical resources of our day, and has clearly shown how art must and will again become part of everyday life, without the need of lowering artistic standards through the means of the applied plastic arts."
- 14 Coates's advocacy of Modernism is effectively reviewed in Sherban Cantacuzino, *Wells Coates, a Monograph* (London: G. Fraser, 1978). Cantacuzino also covers the Canadian schemes Coates worked on during the 1950s, ending with three projects for Vancouver, including the "Project '58" redevelopment proposal. Coates's papers are now at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. Contemporary British urban design, closely monitored in Canada, is covered effectively in John Summerson, *Ten Years of British Architecture '45-'55* (London, 1956).
- 15 The choice of Lasserre was made by Dr. Norman MacKenzie, president of the University of British Columbia, but only after Peter Cotton and a group of veteran undergraduates won the support of the professional bodies representing the local contractors and architects as well as the leading Vancouver Modernists, including Pratt and Berwick. Information derived from the unpublished three-volume scrapbook of the School of Architecture, U.B.C. Special Collections.
- 16 Some indication of his contribution to the Canadian architectural profession is recounted in Irena Murray and Norbert Schoenauer, eds., *John Bland at Eighty: A Tribute* (Montréal: McGill University, 1991).

- 17 Information based on discussions with Bland, Chard Wisnicki, and McNab.
- 18 Lyle's article, published in the March 1932 issue of the *JRAIC*, is quoted in Geoffrey Simmins, *Documents in Canadian Architecture* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1992), 158. Waters's broadcast was reprinted in *JRAIC* 13, no. 3 (March 1936): 49.
- 19 *Torontonensis*, 1937, p. 295.
- 20 Information kindly supplied by Thornton, who in 1938 worked with Birmingham in the Vancouver office of C.B.K. Van Norman, together signing at least one of the working drawings preserved at the Vancouver City Archives for Van Norman's Modernist house on West 61st Avenue (demolished in February 1994).
- 21 "Bridging the Gap in an Ever Changing Environment," *JRAIC* 37, no. 7 (July 1960): 299-300. The theoretical foundation and objectives of the McGill curriculum were nicely defined by two former students writing in *John Bland at Eighty*: David Burke, who graduated in 1957, noted the respect accorded to Mies, Le Corbusier, and Gropius, but also to F.L. Wright and E. Saarinen, adding "The Modern movement was well entrenched at McGill ... Yet John and his staff ensured that the educational process never became doctrinaire"; Moshe Safdie, whose graduating thesis formed the basis for the Expo '67 Habitat apartments, recalled the "sense of Architecture for the common cause, architecture as the art of building, rooted in the technology of construction and forever in search of the appropriate interpretation of programme and purpose and its imprint on the spatial organization of the building."
- 22 Apart from the stress laid upon spiritual and aesthetic matters in Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*, Gropius averred in *The Scope of Total Architecture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Collier, 1966), 60, that "rationalization [was] only [Modernism's] purifying role. The other aspect, the satisfaction of the human soul, is just as important as the material." At the 8th C.I.A.M. conference at Bridgewater, England, in 1947, the delegates (originally to include Douglas Simpson) reiterated their objective "to work for the creation of a physical environment, that will satisfy man's emotional and material needs and stimulate his spiritual growth." Quoted in Giedion, *Decade of Modern Architecture*, 12.
- 23 Arthur, trained at the University of Liverpool and in the office of Sir Edwin Lutyens before being appointed to the University of Toronto in 1923, defined his idea of Modernism in a February 1936 CBC talk, "How to Appreciate Architecture," reprinted in the December 1936 *JRAIC*: "We live in a machine age and are only now beginning to see that modern materials and construction have an intrinsic beauty that needs no embellishment."
- 24 For Tecton and brief references to Lasserre's presence there, see John Allan, *Berthold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress* (London: RIBA Publications, 1992).
- 25 Fred Lasserre, "Modern Architecture: The New Aesthetics and Cement," *JRAIC* 15, no. 6 (June 1938): 145. In 1938, Arthur also published Modernist works by Raymond McGrath, Agnolo Mazzoni, Erich Mendelsohn, Connell Ward and Lucas, J.B. Parkin (in August, a rather diluted brick Modernist house in Croydon), Richard Neutra, and the pioneering eastern Canadian Modernist Greenshields house in Montréal by Ernest Barott. In 1937 he selected several British Modernist buildings, including a villa at Frinton by Oliver Hill and the Quarry Hill Flats at Leeds by R.A.H. Livett, and printed an advertisement for Yorke's *Modern House in England*.
- 26 The ideological context of the exhibition is explored in Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*, Stephen Perella, ed. (New York: Rizzoli/CBA, 1992).
- 27 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 28 Mies's quip is quoted in David A. Spaeth, *Mies Van Der Rohe* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 19.
- 29 Arthur published a photograph of Mendelsohn's own house at Rehoboth in the January 1938 issue of *JRAIC*.
- 30 Chitty's house had also been illustrated in the February 1938 issue of the *Architectural Review*. Photographs of the Simon House are preserved in a bound typescript autobiography kindly made available by Mrs. Gerson, which also includes illustrations of his own more radical Modernist house, "Wildwood," erected in 1950 on South Drive, Winnipeg.
- 31 In 1937, *L'Architecture* illustrated domestic architecture by B. Taut, M. Fry, G. Samuel, as well as R. Schindler, together with (in October) Alvar Aalto's Viipuri Library. In 1938 it would also carry photographs of Howe and Lesaze's P.S.F.S. Building in Philadelphia and Tecton's Highpoint I Flats in London, in addition to houses by Soriano and Harris plus a report on the M.A.R.S. London exhibition.
- 32 The design objectives of these architects were widely publicized throughout James and Katherine M. Ford's *The Modern House in America* (New York: Architectural Book Pub., 1940), including direct statements by Wurster, Belhuschi, Harris, and Soriano, who commented interestingly (p. 126): "There is no such thing as a distinctly American modern architecture nor any other nationality. All serious works of art are international and not national."
- 33 Information kindly supplied by Nathan Nemetz.
- 34 McKay, 72. The comment was made about such of his conceptually different and already neo-Wrightian houses as that commissioned via Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt by Dr. Harold Copp in 1950 (1952 Massey Silver Medal).
- 35 *Torontonensis*, 1939, p. 129. The author was Jacob Sugarman, who later had a distinguished career in Ontario.

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