# *Reconciling the Universal and the Particular:*

## *Arthur Erickson in the 1940s and 1950s*

When Arthur Erickson is mentioned, his large public projects usually come to mind, especially Simon Fraser University (1963-65), the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (1971-76), Robson Square and the Law Courts in Vancouver (1973-79), Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto (1976-82), and the Canadian Chancery in Washington, D.C. (1982-89). These have received the lion's share of attention in print, including his own. It is easy to forget that before working on any of them, even the relatively early Simon Fraser, he had built a small but distinguished practice as a house designer in coastal British Columbia.[1] Even before that, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he had undertaken extended training and travel. This formative period, before Erickson became an architectural superstar, deserves attention because it holds clues to the interests and points of view he would later bring to his more prominent work.

by Christopher Thomas

In the spring of 1953 Erickson returned to his native Vancouver from his architectural studies and travels to begin practice. His decision to return home, while understandable, merits attention, for it was crucial to the path his career took. Though now Canada's third-largest city, Vancouver at the time was "a sleepy, provincial, rather stuffy city" of just over half a million[2]—hardly, it would seem, a promising place for an ambitious and worldly young architect to launch a career. But, in fact, there was much to draw him home. First—*pace* Freud—he seems to have been genuinely close to his parents and grandmother, of whom he speaks with great fondness and admiration.[3] In particular, he praises the way they encouraged their children to think independently, which he thinks crucial to his later risk-taking.

The Ericksons, refugees from eastern Canada like so many people then in Vancouver, played active, enthusiastic roles in the little city. His mother Myrtle was part of its flourishing arts community, serving on the women's committee of the Vancouver Art Gallery. This gave him friendships and business contacts that were useful to his career, for in the 1950s he badly needed work. Erickson positively enjoyed Vancouver—its smallness and the closeness that bred, and his position in its cultural life. Even as a teenager he had been welcomed in culturally progressive circles in the city, especially by B.C. Binning and Lawren Harris; and, while studying architecture, he had worked in the summers in local architectural offices.

For a newly-minted Modernist architect, Vancouver was an exceedingly promising place to set up shop, perhaps the most promising in Canada. It was considered open, relatively prosperous, and—for North America—artistically daring, with a body of Modernist architects sharing a "pioneering," "collegial" spirit.[4] In 1962, John C. Parkin, the leading Modernist designer in Toronto, surveyed postwar architecture in Canada. As late as 1952 or 1953, he said, the cause of "contemporary" design in Canada had been pretty much lost everywhere except on the Pacific coast, which "had already been won by such pioneer-modernists as Ned Pratt ... a hardy group whose residential work was both a source of constant hope as well as envy to those of us in the East."[5]

The kind of work Parkin had in mind which made easterners green with envy is exemplified by the Mayhew house of 1950-51, on the "Canadian Riviera"—Beach Drive in Victoria—by the thoroughly Wrightian Ron Thom, supported by Ned Pratt, to whom he was apprenticed (**figure 1**).[6] It shows the structural system of timber posts and beams—called at the time the "Schindler truss," after California architect Rudolf Schindler—framing large areas of glass, brick, and wood. Vancouver Modernists had worked out this sysyem in the Forties and adapted it to the steep, densely wooded sites, mild temperatures, and even light of the coast. Their sources of inspiration were Frank Lloyd Wright's work, the residential design of the Bay Region School, Northwest Coast native construction, Japanese spatial organization and joinery, possibly the Hudson's Bay Company's historic "Red River" system of post-and-groove construction, and certainly the contemporary work of Schindler, Mies van der Rohe, and Richard Neutra (to whom I will return), European architects in America who were trying to soften the dated austerity of prewar Modernism by incorporating local references and modest, "natural" ornament. So, even had Vancouver not been his home, Erickson would have been anything but rusticating himself by settling there in 1953.

In addition, he had—and has maintained—a mystic attachment to the city and its spectacular setting. Mysticism, which abounds in his conversation and writing, in fact goes a long way to explaining his boldness and success, for he is really a poet or pagan priest "dressed for success" like a businessman.[7] This is connected with the fact that, like Ron Thom, he was a painter before he was an architect. Some of his mysticism is directed at his city: "What is it about Vancouver that keeps many of us inescapably under its spell?" he asked in a recent essay. "Is it because we succumb so heedlessly to the sheer beauty of its setting—to the haunting melancholy of a summer evening's light or to the spring air washed with sea salt and the sap of alder?"[8]

He loves Vancouver's perpetual rain and overcast skies, which drive many mad but which give the light a distinctive flat greyness that he incorporates into his work. The abundant browns and golds in Nature's palette, for instance, set the stroke for his affinity for fawn-hued concrete, and it could be argued—though I will not do so here—that he has consistently done his strongest work in coastal British Columbia.[9] So we may be sure that, however practical his decision in 1953 to settle in Vancouver may have been, more than practicality was involved.

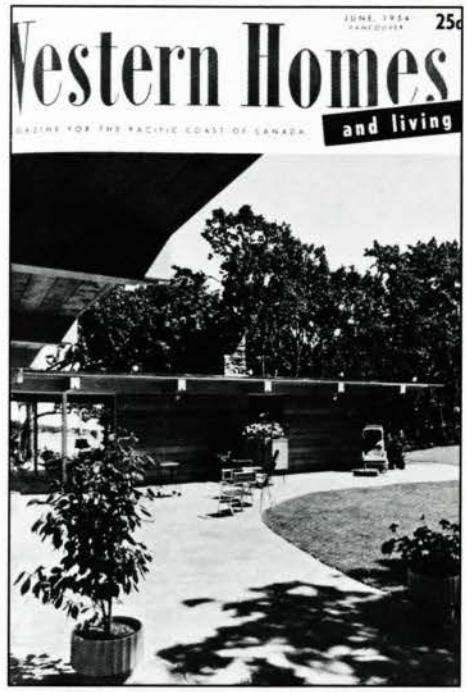



**Figure 1. Ron Thom, for Sharp & Thompson, Berwick, Pratt, architect; Logan Mayhew house, Victoria, B.C., 1950-51. View of patio, southwest side. (*Western Homes and Living*, June 1954, cover)**

**Figure 3 (previous page). Erickson & Massey, architects; Smith house, West Vancouver, B.C., 1953. View from the south. (*RAIC Journal* 33, no. 2 [February 1956]: 41)**

1 Basic sources on the architect's work are Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2:793-96; *The Architecture of Arthur Erickson, With Text by the Architect* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988); Edith Iglauer, *Seven Stones: A Portrait of Arthur Erickson, Architect* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981); and Barbara E. Shapiro, curator, *Arthur Erickson: Selected Projects, 1971-1985*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1985), which includes a brief critical biography by Rhodri W. Liscombe.

2 Alvin Balkind, "On Ferment and Golden Ages," in Max Wyman, ed., *Vancouver Forum I: Old Power, New Forces* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992), 64. The city of Vancouver's population in the 1951 census was 344,000, the metropolitan region's 526,000.

3 My information on the architect's family comes from *The Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 17; Iglauer, 35-40; and a telephone interview with Erickson on 1 April 1995.

Where did this mystical streak originate? There is something profoundly religious in Erickson, though he professes no interest in formal religion. Again, we should look to his family. Though his father was Anglican and philosophically conservative, his mother embraced Christian Science, and the pervasive optimism of that creed rubbed off on him. "Deep inside, I am convinced that everything is basically good," he has said.[10] Spirituality, too, was central to local progressive culture. "New" religions—humanist, Oriental, syncretic—have long been popular on the Pacific coast; and, since the 1920s at least, Modernist culture in Vancouver has been deeply imbued with them. Theosophy is a case in point. Erickson names Lawren Harris as one of the three key influences on him.[11] (The others are his mother and a teacher at McGill whom we will meet shortly.)

A key figure in the economics, politics, and spirituality of Canadian art through much of the 20th century, Lawren Harris helped found the ultra-nationalist Group of Seven painters in Toronto in 1920 and, after a decade of personal instability that included a period in the United States, settled in Vancouver in 1940. "The white-maned Harris" and his wife, "the beautiful Bess," as Erickson calls them, were wealthy, forward-looking, and bountiful, if slightly tyrannical, Maecenases of modern art who held weekly salons and musicales in their home, to which Erickson was invited from the age of 16. Harris, Erickson says, gave him "a foundation of assurance" for his life and taught him to trust his own instincts.[12]

The Harrises followed Theosophy, the arcane, allegedly natural religious system of Madame Blavatsky, who had preached ascent from mundane reality to higher, more advanced and spiritualized life-forms. Harris's own experiments in painting in the 1930s and 1940s in semi- and non-figurative painting—among the first by a Canadian artist—were inspired by forms of nature reshaped according to Theosophic symbolism of colour and geometry. Erickson, though he now follows Theosophy no more than any other system, has always taken ideas of cosmic progress seriously. He believes in the literal existence and working of a Zeitgeist and is convinced that history as it is generally taught is a sham, since "the individuals involved are only agents of the evolutionary process."[13] This faith in modernism—among the strongest held by any architect still in practice today, I believe—is rooted in the transcendental belief communicated to him fifty years ago by his mother and Harris, and others. A vision of Vancouver as the dwelling-place of the modern, a promontory where the Nike of the New has alighted, has animated him from those days to this.

In 1947, six years before beginning work in his own right, Erickson began to study architecture at McGill University. This was after attending the University of British Columbia for a year, taking the Canadian army engineering program, studying Japanese, and serving in the Far East just as the Second World War was winding down, experiences that permanently magnetized him to Japanese design.[14] The choice of McGill, though again practical—it was the only eastern school that answered his inquiries, he says—also merits attention. Since U.B.C. began a programme in architecture that year, one might have expected a young man without much money but with deep roots in Vancouver—indeed, in the very group that was starting the programme—to enter it and become one of its first star graduates. But he did not, saying he did not want to study at home. Well-travelled already thanks to military service and aware of cultural differences between eastern and western Canada, he wanted to study architecture in the east. (To this day he advises prospective architectural students to study away from home.) Among other things, this suggests that, whatever the tone of his later work, the vision of a regional architecture, especially a regional domestic architecture, that animated the founders of the programme at U.B.C. may not entirely have interested him.[15]

Douglas Shadbolt, who joined Erickson in going to McGill, also implies that the new programme had its limits,[16] and one suspects both had their sights set higher. For his part, Erickson was already well-travelled and cosmopolitan; he had a hard time, he says, making up his mind between architecture and the diplomatic service.[17] Not that regionalism and organicism were foreign to him: seeing a magazine article on Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, he says, was what determined him to study architecture.[18] But we should not let the first houses in Vancouver he designed in the 1950s cause us, retrospectively, to overemphasize his regionalism before then. Rather, I suggest, globalism and regionalism were already fighting within him.

Erickson's universalism and mysticism were bound to be reinforced at McGill, for a decade earlier its school of architecture had undergone a "palace revolt," the Beaux-Arts and all its works replaced by the visionary Bauhaus and its credo.[19] Gordon Webber taught the foundation course at McGill's school of architecture.

4 Interview, 1 April 1995. On Modernist culture and architecture in the city in the period, generally, see Kalman, 2:785-95; *Vancouver: Art and Artists, 1931-1983* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), esp. Douglas Shadbolt, "Post-war Architecture in Vancouver," 108-19; Balkind, "On Ferment and Golden Ages," and Erickson, "To Understand the City We Make," in Wyman, *Vancouver Forum I*, 63-79 and 146-58 respectively; Sherry McKay, "Western Living, Western Homes," SSAC *Bulletin* 14, no. 3 (September 1989): 65-74; Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, "The Culture of Modernism: Vancouver's Public Libraries, 1947-1957," in *Architecture + Culture: International Research Symposium, Proceedings* (Ottawa: Carleton University School of Architecture, 1992), 358-61; and Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, "Modes of Modernizing: The Acquisition of Modernist Design in Canada," SSAC *Bulletin* 19, no. 3 (September 1994): 60-74. The story will be told in the fullest form ever in Liscombe's exhibition, *Vancouver: The Spirit of Modernism*, sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Architecture, to begin in 1996.

5 Parkin, "Architecture in Canada Since 1945," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* [hereafter *RAIC Journal*] 39, no. 1 (January 1962): 34.

6 See Donald H. Mitchell, "Modern Among the Oaks," *Western Homes and Living*, June 1954, 11-15; and Douglas Shadbolt (photos by John Flanders), *Ron Thom: The Shaping of an Architect* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995), 18-19, 24-25.

7 Two examples: "I believe we live our lives backward ... that everything is known and that somehow we have to go through it once again" (quoted in Iglauer, 54); and facing financial ruin in 1991, he told *Maclean's* he was "foolishly optimistic" about his future ("Plans gone awry," *Maclean's*, 22 July 1991, 34).

8 Erickson, "To Understand the City We Make," 146.

9 It is clear from talking to him and from the attention he has given it in print that, of all his public buildings, his personal favourite is the Museum of Anthropology at U.B.C. On the museum, see John M. Vastokas, "Architecture as Cultural Expression," *Artscanada* 33 (October/November 1976): 1-15.

10 Iglauer, 39.

11 Iglauer, 48. For a recent treatment of Harris, see Peter Larisey, *Light for a Cold Land: Lawren Harris's Work and Life — An Interpretation* (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1993), esp. ch. 13 (on Harris in Vancouver).

12 *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 17. For instance, when he could not decide whether to continue with his painting or to become an architect, Harris talked the question over with him but refused to give advice, "throwing me back on my own resources." Telephone interview, 1 April 1995, and Iglauer, 42.

13 Iglauer, 46. He made the same point to the author in conversation in January 1995.

He was the third formative influence on Erickson's life, "a new prophet challenging all cherished precepts and forcing students into their own creative resources."[20] A painter who had studied with Moholy-Nagy of the Bauhaus in Chicago, Webber would utter puzzling aphorisms in class and refuse to answer students' questions directly so as not to restrict their freedom of thought. His classes amused most students, but not Erickson, who came to value the way Webber (like Harris) stimulated his self-reliance. Not surprisingly, the "discovery" approach, rooted partly in transcendentalism and partly in Bauhaus teaching methods, surfaces again and again in Erickson's own thought and work, especially in his predilection for new building forms and untried materials.

When Erickson himself taught architecture at U.B.C. from 1957 to 1963, Webber was his inspiration for "unteaching" students, as he puts it, by giving them imaginative, open-ended exercises (such as the celebrated "seven stones") in design studio to challenge their preconceptions.[21] This has the ring of the Bauhaus, as do many of his ideas. His real contribution to architecture, he believes, has been to reinvent institutions: not just to create imaginative, beautiful forms in which to house them, but to re-imagine them as human types. Though given, like many other postwar architects, to disparaging Modernism in the sense of pure functionalism, he is convinced that the key to meaning in architecture is the "dialogue" between a building's programme and its site.[22] This, I suggest, is a Bauhaus analogue, via Neutra (on whom more follows), to the Beaux-Arts idea that design is generated by plan and *parti*. So, along with his spiritual belief in progress, his Bauhaus training at McGill explains Erickson's lifelong faith in the validity of Modernism—though he has since inflected and modified that faith.

He arrived at McGill, he says, with "a fixation on Wright," but found few sympathetic teachers.[23] Wright invited him to join the fellowship at Taliesin North when Erickson visited there in the fall of 1949, an offer he almost accepted.[24] But the school at McGill was oriented to European Modernism and its postwar American offshoots. One instructor thought the sun rose and set on Le Corbusier, while others were Miesian. As a result he was led in new directions, something for which he is now grateful; and, though he always speaks of Wright with great respect, his own work has seldom referred overtly to Wright's. Rather, his wellspring has been the tradition of European Modernism domesticated in North America after the war, especially by Neutra.

Having declined the offer of a place at Taliesin in favour of the prospect held out by McGill's John Bland of a travel scholarship when he graduated—suggesting just how successful a student he was—Erickson set off for Europe in 1951, going first, somewhat by accident, to the Middle East and the Mediterranean before seeing Britain and Western Europe, where he had planned to start. His teachers at McGill had given him little taste for history—though he would certainly have read Giedion's *Space, Time, and Architecture*—so the trip, which started in Egypt, was a revelation to him. Whereas he had planned a pilgrimage to the shrines of European Modernism, the trip instead opened his eyes to history and to "how inseparable a building's appearance is from climate and place."[25]

He was not the only architect to have this experience in the early 1950s. Louis Kahn's exposure in 1951 to Roman and other antiquities in the Mediterranean area was decisive in his turn to a more massive and monumental architecture than he had previously practiced.[26] History, especially ancient history, it seems, was *au courant*. This was largely due to the vast influence in the period of Le Corbusier, who had long praised ancient building forms, especially Greek temples, for their probity and clarity, but who, since the war, had been turning for inspiration to yet more ancient and primitive Mediterranean prototypes in, for instance, the design of his Unité d'Habitation at Marseilles (1947).[27] The study of Antique remains, made possible again by the reopening of the Mediterranean to travel by civilians, was an aspect of postwar architects' anxious search for a "new monumentality."[28] So Erickson's experience was far from isolated.

In fact, Le Corbusier was exceptionally important to Erickson at this time—and, in my view, has remained so. To a great degree he has adopted Corbusier's model of design as laboratory activity—*recherches minutieuses*—and his turn to Antiquity as a "useable past" in the search for a physical, bodily architecture of masses seen in light. Erickson's work is filled with veiled references to Classicism, and even today he keeps a copy of *Le Modulor* (1948), Corbusier's outline of his proportional system, over the centre of his office desk.

This is not to say that Le Corbusier was the only modern architect in Europe whose work interested him at the time of his travels. In fact, he saw a considerable slice of modern architecture. He met Gordon Webber and Guy Desbarats of McGill in

14 Iglauer, 42-46. On his affinity for Japanese design, see his articles "The Weight of Heaven," *The Canadian Architect* 9, no. 3 (March 1964): 48-53, "The Architecture of Japan," *The Canadian Architect* 11, no. 12 (December 1966): 28-36, and his lecture *Habitation: Space, Dilemma, and Design*, 1965 Canadian Housing Design Council Lecture ([Ottawa?]: The Council, c. 1965), esp. pp. 5, 9, 10.

15 Little has appeared in print on the founding of the programme at U.B.C., but it is mentioned in Shadbolt, "Post-war Architecture in Vancouver," 110, and McKay, 67.

16 In Irena Murray and Norbert Schoenauer, *John Bland at Eighty: A Tribute* (Montréal: McGill University, 1991), 26.

17 Iglauer, 46.

18 *Ibid.*, and *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 17.

19 See Murray and Schoenauer, 12-13 (in interview with Bland), and Liscombe, "Modes of Modernizing," 67.

20 *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 18. See also Iglauer, 48.

21 See "Proceeded to 'unteach'" in *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 22, and "seven stones exercise" in Iglauer, 59. In the exercise he simply told the students to "choose seven stones, and present your project in three weeks" (Bruno Freschi's words).

22 This idea is articulated in *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 19 and passim; *Habitation: Space, Dilemma, and Design*, 5; and "The Weight of Heaven," 50.

23 Interview, 1 April 1995.

24 *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 18.

25 *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 19. The most detailed account of the trip is in Iglauer, 51-54.

26 David G. De Long, "The Mind Opens to Realizations," in David B. Brownlee *et al.*, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 50-51. A development connected to architecture, though not to an architect, was Vincent Scully's first real sight of the Greek temples, which took place in 1951-52 and eventually issued in his book *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962). The book was formative of what came, in retrospect, to be called Postmodernism.

27 For Le Corbusier's early attitude to the Greek temple, see his *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (1923; Oxford: Butterworth Architecture, 1989), 199-223. On the Unité, see Willy Boesiger, *Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: The Complete Architectural Works* (London: Thames & Hudson, c. 1946), 4:176-93.

28 See Siegfried Giedion, "The Need for a New Monumentality" (written in 1944), in *Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 25-39.

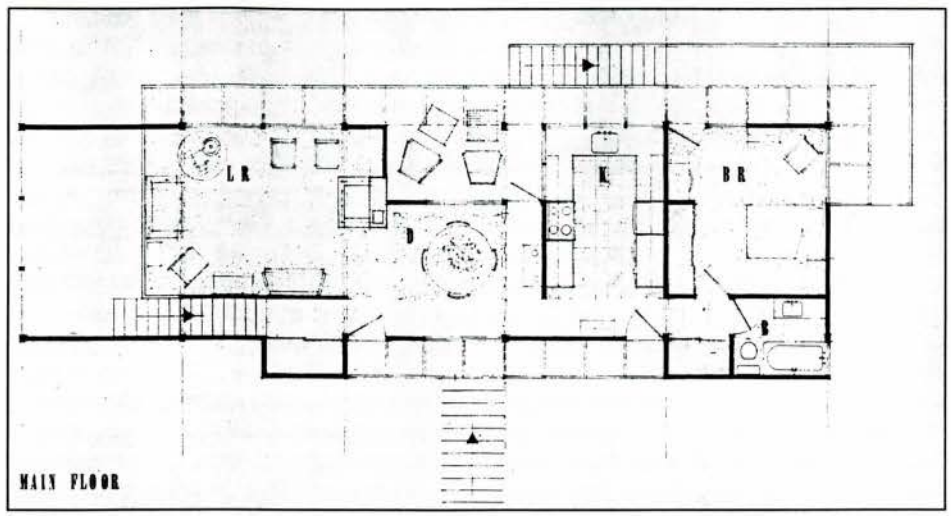



**Figure 2. Erickson & Massey, architects; Smith house, West Vancouver, B.C., 1953. Plan of main floor. (*RAIC Journal* 33, no. 2 [February 1956]: 42)**

Toulouse (by chance, he says); they had a car, and urged him to join them on their return trip to England via the French Riviera and Spain—which he had already seen—and Switzerland, Germany, and the Low Countries—which he had not.[29] On that trip he did not get to Scandinavia, but the idealistic, rather free Modernism of that region, exemplified by the work of Alvar Aalto, set the stage for some of his own later designs in Vancouver. Erickson inclined to Aalto-ish gestures like turf roofs and peeled-log columns.

Thus, thanks to his study and extensive travels, Arthur Erickson came home to Vancouver in the spring of 1953 a very knowing, sophisticated young architect. Though he had little practical experience, he had a global, internationalist outlook and "big ideas," of which Simon Fraser in the early Sixties was the first built manifestation.[30] In this respect he was more like Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller or Louis Kahn than a Canadian architect like, say, Ron Thom. No wonder he was restless in local architects' offices and did not satisfy them, which he admits was largely his own fault.[31] So, though a local boy, he had made himself an outsider or foreigner, a role he now confesses he used to relish. This also partly explains why the U.B.C. school of architecture did not hire him to teach till 1957, by which time it may have been embarrassing not to have him on the faculty.[32]

Big ideas or not, Erickson had to put food on the table, and he returned home so poor he had to move back in with his parents. So, while working with little success for large firms, he took jobs on the side with Geoffrey Massey, a young architect trained at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, designing houses in variants of the Pacific coast modern style described earlier. Their first was a small house for the Modernist painter Gordon Smith and weaver Marion Smith in suburban West Vancouver. Begun in the year Erickson returned, it suggests an attempt to reconcile internationalist, specifically Bauhaus, ideas with the regional style (**figures 2, 3** [page 36]).[33] Though framed in timber with plank ceilings and a brick chimney (Smith did much of the carpentry himself), the house was a pale, glazed, oblong volume lifted off the forest floor but anchored at one end by a utility-block and studio of double height. The effect was lighter and crisper, more skeletal and abstract, than that of other houses in the local style. Balancing needs for privacy and entertainment, its plan of just over 1,300 square feet was varied and contrapuntal, with generous, flowing spaces. To Erickson's good fortune, the Massey Foundation of Toronto had recently inaugurated a national programme of awards for exemplary modern design, and the house took a medal in one of the early rounds, giving his reputation an early boost.

In 1955, the year Erickson & Massey won the first medal, he designed a house in West Vancouver for artist Ruth Killam, who later married Geoff Massey to make it the Killam-Massey house (**figures 4, 5**).[34] Again, the house was a longitudinal bar, built on a promontory perpendicular to the shoreline to take advantage of a spectacular view of Howe Sound. With a skylit studio at the inland end, the house once again had great variety and privacy within very small compass. White and abstract, it hovered on the rock like a temple to an aerial deity. Whiteness, achieved here by painting the timber frame (the infill was glass and boards stained driftwood-grey), was becoming a trademark of Erickson's, adopted in part, I think, to distinguish his work in the Bauhaus spirit from that of the timber regionalists.

29 Interview, 1 April 1995.

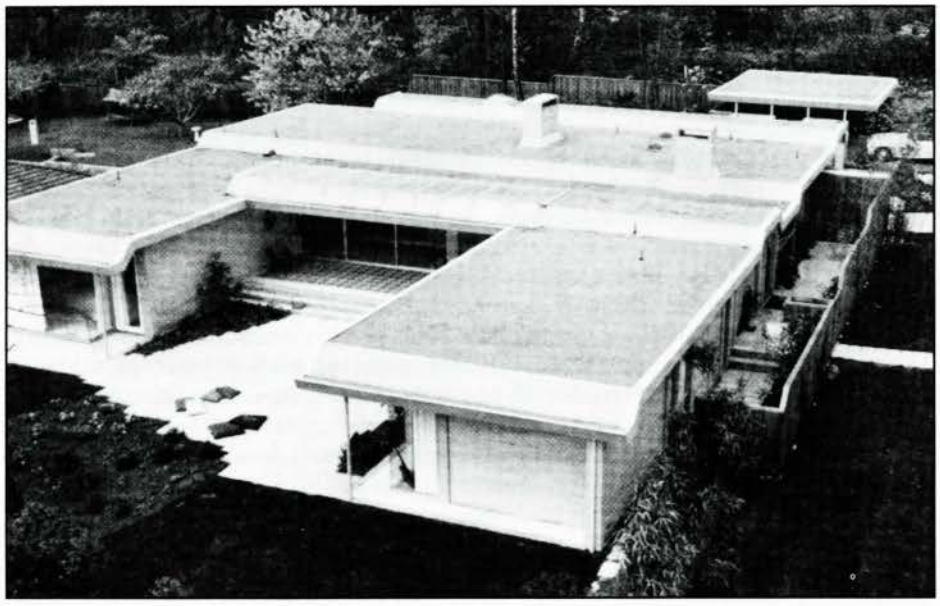
30 The scope of his ambition, however, was hinted at in his "Project 56," a scheme he volunteered in 1956 for a housing megablock in Vancouver's West End to forestall the kind of spiky, capitalistic "high-rising" of the area that had already begun. *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 44-45, and Iglauer, 42-43.

31 "Really, I was a dreamer and not much use." Iglauer, 55.

32 Until then, he says (interview, 1 April 1995), Frederic Lasserre of the school had not thought he had anything to offer and may have been jealous of his early Massey Medals. Through Doug Shadbolt's good offices, however, he had taught at the University of Oregon for a year.

33 On the first Smith house (replaced by another designed by Erickson in 1964 and since demolished), see *RAIC Journal* 32, no. 12 (December 1955): 452, 456; *RAIC Journal* 33, no. 2 (February 1956): 41-44; and *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 21.

34 *RAIC Journal* 35, no. 12 (December 1958): 442-44, and *Architecture of Arthur Erickson*, 21-22.



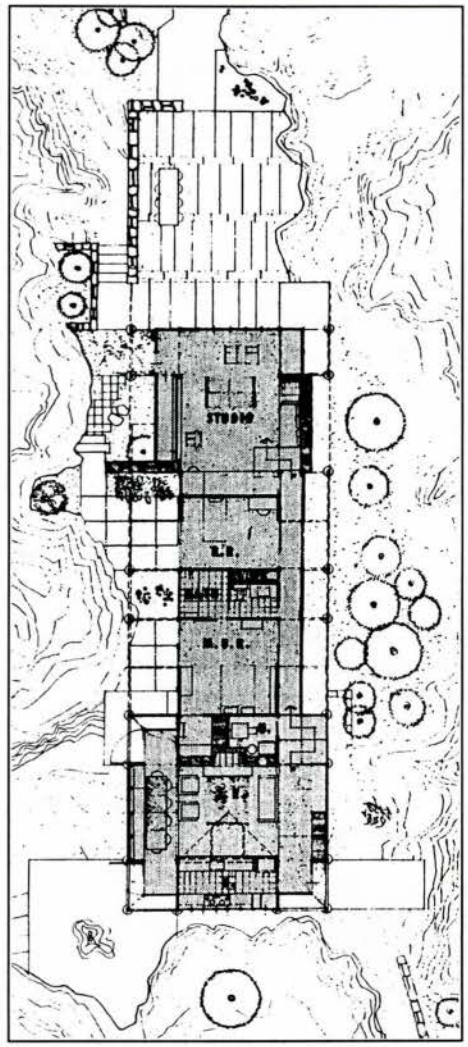


Figure 4 (top left). Erickson & Massey, architects; Killam-Massey house, West Vancouver, B.C., 1955. Exterior. (*RAIC Journal* 35, no. 12 [December 1958]: 442)

Figure 5 (above). Killam-Massey house, West Vancouver, B.C. Plan. (*RAIC Journal* 35, no. 12 [December 1958]: 443)

Figure 6 (left). Arthur C. Erickson, architect; J.L. Danto house, Vancouver, 1961. Exterior. (*RAIC Journal* 41, no. 11 [November 1964]: 43)

Another of Erickson's trademarks was a one-storey oblong pavilion. The minimal, rectangular pavilion had been a gesture of modern architecture at least since Le Corbusier's (then Jeanneret's) Dom-i-no house of 1914, but it enjoyed a burst of renewed favour in the late 1940s and early 1950s after Mies used it for the much-published Farnsworth House in Illinois. Erickson was clearly drawn to it. Pavilions set at 90-degree angles around courtyards or in parallel runs terracing down slopes became a compositional key to many of his houses of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Danto house in Vancouver (**figure 6**). The Killam-Massey house, which won the young architects a second Massey medal in 1958, shows Erickson hitting his stride quietly and at small scale.

The design also suggests interest in Richard Neutra's designs for houses in resort areas of California, such as the Kaufmann desert house at Palm Springs, of 1946—which, however, Erickson did not see until a decade later. In these designs Neutra sought to balance a sense of place with universal, international principles of modern

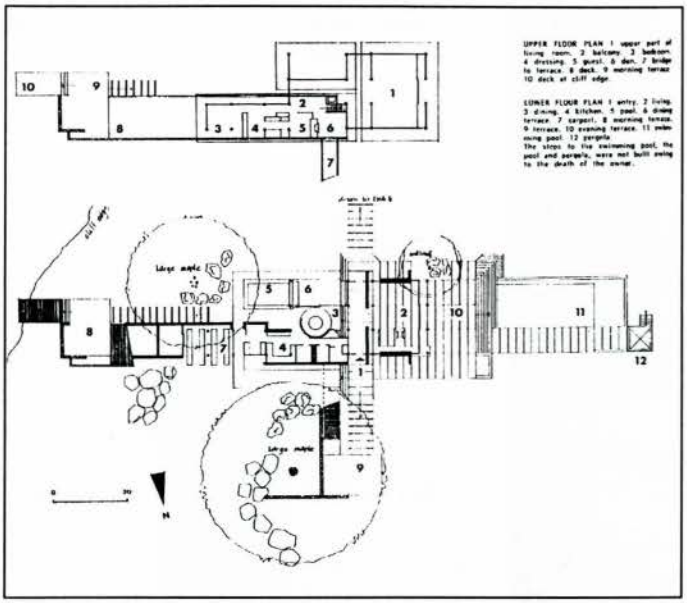


**Figure 7 (above). Arthur C. Erickson, architect; Filberg house, Comox, B.C., 1958. Floor plans. (*The Canadian Architect* 5, no. 12 [December 1960]: 52)**

**Figure 8 (above right). Filberg house, Comox, B.C. View of pool and south face of house. (*The Canadian Architect* 5, no. 12 [December 1960]: 56)**

design, much as Erickson and Massey were trying to do. "Heighten and intensify what [the site] may offer, never work against its grain and fiber," wrote Neutra, who from the early Forties sought to nest his houses, often L, T, and pinwheel compositions, into the landscape without sacrificing abstract modern perfection.[35] This was the balance Erickson was seeking, too, and it is no accident that in 1956-57, while he was teaching at the University of Oregon, he and a friend went to see the Kaufmann house—though on the spot it disappointed him.[36]

Erickson's house for Ruth Killam was smaller than Neutra's California houses, but the sense of the crisp, elegant, white Modernist envelope, of economical, strongly articulated support based on the Miesian exoskeleton, and of rough and sleek materials juxtaposed, all recall Neutra's work. Indeed, Neutra had loomed over Modernist circles in Vancouver since the early 1940s, when Binning had begun inviting him to visit the city each summer and to lecture informally on his philosophy of humane modernism.[37] The young Erickson (and Thom) had taken part in these occasions, so it is not surprising to find Neutra's influence in these early house designs.

Erickson's biggest, most differentiated, and most widely published house of the 1950s was a residence and conference centre at Comox on Vancouver Island for the wealthy, idealistic Robert Filberg (**figures 7, 8**).[38] After the two medals, Erickson was being noticed, and here, with an indulgent client and a bigger budget, he could be expansive in his mysticism of site, light, and contrasting materials and textures. At first glance the house is poles apart from the earlier ones, altogether more decorative and curvilinear, with its upswept eaves and perforated screens like Islamic woodwork mashrabiyas. The structural frame is of steel, not wood, and details, including the screens and curious, prominent "columns" concealing lighting devices, are of bronze. The hearth and shaped ceilings have a Corbusian flavour. The "shimmer" and complex layering of the design, part of the post-Miesian mood of "decorated modernism" captured in the better-known work of Yamasaki and Stone, had not been seen in Erickson's earlier, more austere designs. So here, despite the scale and ambition of the design, Erickson does seem to be who he says he was, the young architect in search.

On closer inspection, though, the clarity of his earlier plans and sections is evident. The house consists of cross-axial volumes slung across a hollow between natural mounds and resting on a rough masonry podium "represent[ing] protection and mass ... more landscape than architecture."[39] This podium is reminiscent of the artificial masonry "mesa" that underpins Taliesin West (he had seen Wright's winter home and studio in Arizona about a year before he designed the Filberg house), though the superstructure of Taliesin West partakes of rough naturalness, whereas Erickson's self-conscious temple-like glass pavilion sets it off.

A similar pale, sunstruck Mediterraneanism marked his other published commission of the late 1950s, a garden-terrace and pool cabana on the grounds of the Spanish Colonial Revival home of the cultured, progressive chairman of B.C. Electric, Dal Grauer (**figure 9**).[40] The additions to this Vancouver property were exquisitely

35 *Richard Joseph Neutra, Mystery and Realities of the Site* (Scarsdale, N.Y.: Morgan & Morgan, c. 1951), 62. On the architect's career, see also Arthur Drexler and Thomas S. Hines, *The Architecture of Richard Neutra: From International Style to California Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982).

36 Interview, 1 April 1995.

37 *Ibid.* On Neutra's visits, see Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture,* 2:787; Shadbolt, "Post-war Architecture in Vancouver," 110; and McKay, 67-69, 72.

38 The house was built in 1958; see "The Design of a House," *Canadian Art* 17 (November 1960): 338-43, and "The Filberg House at Comox on Vancouver Island," *The Canadian Architect* 5, no. 12 (December 1960): 47-58.

39 Erickson, "Filberg House," *The Canadian Architect* 5, no. 12 (December 1960): 48.

40 "Cabana in Vancouver," *The Canadian Architect* 4, no. 7 (July 1959): 44-48.

**Figure 9. Arthur C. Erickson, architect; pool-cabana for Grauer house, Vancouver, B.C., 1957. (*The Canadian Architect* 4, no. 7 [July 1959]: 45)**

inflected and calibrated to their surroundings, with keen sensitivity to light, especially at night. There was also a preoccupation not yet discussed, but which would prove important to the work of the mature Erickson—his fascination with new technology. Moulded fibreglass shells were fabricated for the roof of the shelter, the shapes evoking Classical and Islamic arcades. Here, in germ, is the Erickson of space-frames, water-covered roofs, and underground buildings we came to know later, who married knowing historic references with technology "as modern as tomorrow."

SO WHO WAS ARTHUR ERICKSON IN THE 1950s? Was he a B.C. regionalist, a rising Canadian architectural star, a North American organicist of the Wrightian sort, a Corbusian neo-primitivist, an architectural Abstract Expressionist or an International Modernist and neo-Bauhaüsler? It would be simplistic and evasive to say he was all these things. Yet there can be no doubt that he was a slippery character; he himself admits to having been greatly confused before he saw the architecture of Japan in 1961.[41] Clearly, though, he was more than the Coast-Style Modernist house designer he may have seemed at the time; by 1953, the seeds of larger visions and ambitions had already been planted. Like the Vancouver of 1960, and Canada in the Sixties, Erickson's sights were set far higher than his locale. To my mind, his aim—like that of his early mentor, Lawren Harris—was no less than expressing the universal in the particular.

41 The trip itself, sponsored by the federal government, was a Bauhaus gesture (interview, 1 April 1995). On the trip, see Iglauer, 60-62.

**Christopher Thomas is an assistant professor in the Department of History in Art at the University of Victoria, in Victoria, British Columbia.**