

## ROBERT KLEYN / Proving Ground for Modernity

*Each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself and unfolds it cunningly.*

Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century"

From the mid-1940s through the early 1960s, North Vancouver hosted a series of remarkable architectural experiments. Working from a few pre-war examples, a handful of young architects drafted rules for a new architecture to address the pressing concerns of the post-war era: a social commitment to housing; a regionalist response to design, material and site; and a truly modern built form. Why these "experimental houses" sprang up in North Vancouver has more to do with the historical specificity of the city rather than with the climate, landscape, and abundant wood—the influences usually held to have shaped the "West Coast" style.

Recognition of the importance of the West Coast style came early. Already in 1955, the popular press had declared BC building to be the most advanced in Canada, due to "the softer climate of the Pacific Coast . . . the influence of the best in American house design . . . and the abundant supply of wood."<sup>1</sup> If the BC coast was the place for modernism, the North Shore was the favoured site. Bound by waterfront on one side, mountains on the other, south-facing and sylvan, it was relatively inexpensive and free of the regulations that constrained the Vancouver it overlooked.

The conditions of building in North Vancouver encouraged experiment: first, a pioneering history of independent and individualist projects; second, an abundance of inexpensive building sites; third, the absence of a regular grid due to the topography. General historical, social, and technological factors also played a part: the postwar demilitarization of industry made wartime skills and technologies available plus the reintegration of veterans intensified wartime housing shortages. During the war, the federal government had built several new neighbourhoods to house shipyard workers, but the "rows and rows of shabbily built wooden boxes" were thought inadequate for veterans.<sup>2</sup> The shipbuilding industry kept the city of North Vancouver a predominantly blue-collar community rather

<sup>1</sup> *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, Oct. 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Sommer, *The Ambitious City: A History of the City of North Vancouver* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2007), 197.

# Western Homes

September 1962 25 cents

and LIVING



The Irwin Hoffmans at home • All about doors, doorways, and door hardware • Seven steps to a successful lawn • Douglas Lake road

MRS. T.A. ORHAM,  
2115 WEST 18TH AVE.,  
VANCOUVER 8, B.C.  
K-5 JUNE 30, 1963

Cover of *Western Homes and Living*, September 1962. Photo: Selwyn Pullan.

"The Hoffmans at Home: The world of music sets the theme for the West Coast home of two famous artists, symphony director Irwin Hoffman and concert violinist Esther Glazer."



than the middle-class paradise of the developers' visions, limiting speculation and keeping property values down. Large tracts of land were made available, subdivided into small lots that could be bought by individual builders and architects; for example, Capilano Highlands, originally developed in the 1938 as a complete community in the garden city tradition, is home to numerous of the Neoteric houses designed by architect Fred Hollingsworth as low-cost "starter homes." Many of those trying on new models of inhabitation were progressive thinkers for whom the post-war period represented a new beginning. A history of failed and grandiose schemes such as the 1906 Grand Boulevard development and the 1920s Rosemont subdivision, plus an abundant supply of vacant and bucolic sites, made North Vancouver an ideal testing ground for modernist style. Largely because of lower property values, the younger architects, just making their way up or starting their own firms (Fred Hollingsworth, Ron Thom, Ronald Nairne, etc.) chose North Vancouver for their own houses; the senior partners with deeper pockets preferred West Van (McNabb) or Vancouver's west side (Van Norman, Pratt, Thornton). Clients for these houses, mostly middle class professionals and artists, reflected the social milieu in which architects operated. Coincidentally, North Van was still home to a vital squatter community and thus was already witness to the principal contradiction of modern urbanism—custom built houses for well-off, and improvised dwellings for the poor and marginal. The popular press characterized the city as a place for non-conformists, home to



“escapism, Yogi, nudism, or nearly anything else” as the *Vancouver Province* reported in 1947.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to World War II, North Vancouver designs were predominantly of British origin. The vernacular, because of the nearby sawmills, was wood framed with plank siding, cedar shingles, and a gabled or raked roof—a nod to the generous rains. The better houses sat on granite plinths, like the Maclure mansions across the inlet. There were also various styles of log cabins acknowledging North Van’s rustic setting.<sup>4</sup> Because North Van was more working class and the houses less exuberant than in West Vancouver, young architects were able to risk new solutions to the urgent need for housing. The economic constraints that Fred Hollingsworth faced in North Van seem to have instilled a creative discipline less evident in his grander works. Arthur Erickson’s North Van projects, on the other hand, seem quite free of constraint, just as inventive in the small economy model as in his larger and more famous West Van houses. Ned Pratt’s North Van work shows the same clarity and restraint as his better known projects elsewhere—in fact, the Ritchie house is an almost perfect rendition of his style, a West Coast classic.

The single family house as the preferred format for Modernist experimentation is often the outcome of a close relationship between architect and client.<sup>5</sup> The post-war mood of optimism spurred the exploration of new spatial configurations. The key protagonists experimented with innovative solutions gleaned from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian houses, the Los Angeles Case Study Houses, provocations from Richard Neutra, examples from Oregon, always within an organic approach to design and the drive to temper the machinic qualities of modernism with lyrical inflections from the landscape, topography, the cloudy skies, and even the rainfall. The influence of Japanese prototypes (referred to as “oriental” at that time) is evident in the post-and-beam construction and modular panels of the exteriors that often give them their semblance of rationality.

A distinctive aspect of the fifties and sixties architecture in BC was the integration of artistic and architectural practices. Artist-couples like Bert and Jessie Binning, Doris and Jack Shadbolt, and Molly and Bruno Bobak, were as vital to the local scene as designers like Charles and Ray Eames were to Los

<sup>3</sup> Reporter Alan Jessup quoted in Sommer, *op cit.*, 213.

<sup>4</sup> The cabin exemplifying the rustic hut ideal, with its simple plan and few interior walls, is a model for the minimal dwelling unit, as in Le Corbusier’s own *cabanon* on the shore of the Mediterranean.

<sup>5</sup> Mies’s relationship to his client, Dr. Edith Farnsworth, is a case in point. See for example, the chapter in Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of Modern Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998).



Angeles.<sup>6</sup> While no bohemians, these artist-households provided practical alternatives to the ritual formality of conventional domestic architecture, and a sort of public example for all, not least because so many of them were also teachers. Studio space was integrated into the life of the house itself—this architecture actually domesticated the studio in much the same way that the industrial loft studio was domesticated by the gentrification of the '80s and '90s. "This modern domestic space was new to Vancouver. It was by and large the space in which paintings were made and the space they were meant to animate. This 'setting' for abstract painting doubtless influenced its production, not just in terms of scale, but towards abstraction's optimistic domestic and urban values."<sup>7</sup> Such ideals were promoted by the Art in Living group, the New Design Gallery, and the Vancouver Art Gallery through its exhibitions of ceramics, furniture, and paintings by local artists and designers, such as *Design for Living* (1949) that included architectural plans.

The newly developing suburban domestic lifestyle had profound cultural impact on the post-war period during which these modernist houses were constructed. There was the challenge of integrating women into the new domestic regime—the same ones who had been independent agents in the war-time economy. The cultural-intellectual elevation of the house to a cultural artifact emphasized the importance of woman's new role in a progressive society. Architecture gave spatial expression to the intensified domesticity of the privatized family life of the suburbs. Pastoral, isolated from work and politics, the suburban house no longer needed to segregate the traditional formal and informal or male and female spaces. In the new open plan house, kitchen walls vanished and women's primary work-space was submerged in other zones, particularly the newly minted "family room." All in all, home design expressed the unity of the nuclear family.<sup>8</sup>

Redefined domesticity played into the developing West Coast style, encoded into the plan and reinforced by the sectional conditions, such as the split level design, popular in North Vancouver because of the way it could adapt to the

<sup>6</sup> Doug Shadbolt designed the first Bobak house; Fred Hollingsworth designed the studio-house for the photographer Selwyn Pullan; artist Fred Douglas lived in a Ron Thom house; artist/poet Roy Kiyooka hired Henry York Mann. Architecture was not yet just for the carriage trade.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Watson, "The Lost City: Vancouver Painting in the 1950s," in eds. Elder, Thom et al, *A Modern Life: Art and Design In British Columbia 1945-1960*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery/Arsenal Pulp Press), 95.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, *The New Spirit, Modern Architecture in Vancouver 1938-1963* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre/ Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture 1997).

terrain.<sup>9</sup> The open plan, minimizing fixed walls in favor of free-flowing space, found a welcome home on the West Coast, given its potential to integrate exterior space into its realm. In BC this was enabled by the post and beam system used in many of the projects by Ned Pratt and his protégés Hollingsworth and Thom, plus many others including the builder Lewis Construction. Also seen as more affordable since it saved on construction of walls, the open plan was understood as a rational response to the new conditions for living, and to the ready availability of wood.<sup>10</sup> Plans followed a module, typically 4'x4', which gave them a logic that was simple and straightforward—and thus economical—to construct. In the North Vancouver houses, it was finally social logic and economy that drove the layout, although they never quite attained the free compositions of the more benign climate of California, or the lucid abstractions of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House.<sup>11</sup> Pratt's houses, preoccupied with the logic of construction, are more controlled than those of his protégés, but they are much less constrained than those of Frederick Lassere and Peter Oberlander whose projects are urban, even European, in feel, and whose relationship to the site seems dogmatic in comparison. By controlling the space to the boundaries of the building site, the open plan exploits the potential of the suburban setting, where a house could be nestled among lush trees, or perched on a steep slope overlooking a magnificent view of the Pacific landscape and skies—and on a limited budget! Trees or hedges afforded the privacy that the large expanses of glass denied.

Cultural awareness of the potential of modern architecture to embody “today's way of life” was widely disseminated in the 1950s and early '60s, by national magazines like *Canadian Homes and Gardens*. Vast public interest was aroused. In 1950, Fred Hollingsworth's “Sky Bungalow,” forerunner to the show homes of today,

<sup>9</sup> The split level is another Wright innovation, just like the carport.

<sup>10</sup> There were various approaches to the free plan: the L-shape with day and night-time activities in separate wings joined by a services core, inter-connected pavilions each with a distinct function, the linear plan with living room and sleeping area on opposite ends separated by a kitchen-dining room, and the u-plan defining an open court or garden. Large areas of glazing (not the framed “picture windows” of conventional suburban houses, but sections of the wall replaced by floor to ceiling glass) blur the visual distinction between inside and out, and the overhangs extend the house volumetrically into the site. Inside, long views extend through the flowing space to reveal the inner relationships of its constituent volumes.

<sup>11</sup> While Mies's radical spatial experiment, the 1951 Farnsworth House, seems to have influenced the California architects such as Craig Ellwood, it never gained a foothold in the in BC's domestic work. This could well be due toward an attitude to the relationship to landscape: while Mies treated the landscape as scenery to be framed by floor and ceiling planes, West Coast architects saw landscape as a continuation of the interior spaces of the house. Also, Mies's landscape settings were already tamed, quite in contrast to the rough forested slopes and ravines of North Vancouver.



attracted almost 10% of the population of the Lower Mainland to tour it while on display in the Hudson's Bay parking lot—a true blockbuster. The emphasis on life rather than design was already evident in the Bauhaus 30 years earlier: “The basis of the modern architecture . . . [is] the new mentality . . . the view we take and the manner in which we judge our needs . . . [W]e investigate, foster and utilize [“the new materials”] only if we can thereby achieve a genuine improvement, a greater degree of clarity, a greater ease, and a truer exposition of living as a whole, including aesthetics.”<sup>12</sup> These ideals were manifest in a functionalism that searched for a better fit with the needs and aspirations of users as expressed in the individual dwelling, but also for answers to the pressing problems of the modern city—the form of the “ideal city” and housing solutions for the poor and disadvantaged. As land was still plentiful and relatively cheap, the social aspirations of the “heroic” phase of west coast modernism focused on the single family dwelling and failed to come to terms with the denser urban form.<sup>13</sup>

A belief of the time was that modern art had to be accessible to all, and that modern architecture had to be grounded in social commitment.<sup>14</sup> The houses discussed here can be seen as examples of a type of counter-practice. What these apparently modest projects represent is the commitment of modernist architecture to a social principle, one that went missing shortly after their construction and was all but absent by the 1960s when these architects were servicing clients with generous budgets. Unabashedly suburban in a time when the suburbs were seen as an unquestionable solution to the needs of the “way we live now,” they turn away from the city and its poor and leave those problems to others.

As affluence and consumer culture spread, BC was overtaken by a return to the picturesque roots of the English colonial tradition in which the province remains firmly rooted. This was accompanied by the splitting of the local art and architecture scenes. As artists fled architecture, some headed for the mudflat squats. While in England, the critique of modernist abstraction of the post-war years incorporated the social imagery and methods of an artist like Richard Hamilton, the primacy of the lyrical landscape tradition effectively isolated local

<sup>12</sup> Marcel Breuer, 1937 quoted in Paul Alan-Johnson, *The Theory of Architecture* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994), 134.

<sup>13</sup> The social housing experiment abandoned with Project 58, which replaced part of the Strathcona neighbourhood with European-style slab blocks before it was halted, remains an unfulfilled aspiration. See Windsor Liscombe op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> At the same time, racial codes were still enforced. The January 1958 *Ubysey* reported that restrictive clauses were still enforced in suburbs such as Capilano Highlands.

architects from the wider cultural discourse. From the late-1960s local artists increasingly took on architecture and the urban environment as a field for critical investigation rather than lyrical extrapolation.<sup>15</sup>

The local modernist style in its purest form was largely exhausted by the early 1970s. Thom's work of that period shows investigations of European organic models such as those of Alvar Aalto and Hans Scharoun; Hollingsworth's practice continued to grow, but the Neoteric ideal was over. The "triumph of lyricism over rationalism"<sup>16</sup> was soon supplanted by hippy-era work such as the Kiyooka House of Henry Thomas Mann (in the relatively isolated Riverside Drive area of the city), who integrated regionalism with issues that today belong in the category of sustainability. Ron Thom's more mature work favours vernacular-inspired examples of Wright which could incorporate more spatial drama, and thus reflect the topography of the site and satisfy discerning clients.<sup>17</sup> While Ned Pratt's structural rationalism was initially taken up by builders such as Lewis Construction, it eventually turned into a more extravagant style (as in the work of Brian Hemingway), and the gigantified versions made possible by the now ubiquitous glue-lam beam, hallmark of the new West Coast style.

The abandonment of the rational-social imperative represented by these North Vancouver houses of the 1950s transformed the West Coast style from modernist experiment into updates of the established historical styles that dominate our suburbs. This extrapolation of the British colonial heritage, rendered spectacular by the spatial and structural effects made possible by through the technological development of wood and glass structure, belies the changing cultural and economic demographics of the region. It seems that the divorce of high architecture from its original social concerns as expressed by a commitment to housing rather than houses, has led to a cityscape where exclusive waterfront enclaves abut the squalor of single room accommodations. As Benjamin predicted, the modernist dream has unfolded most cunningly.

<sup>15</sup> Ironically perhaps, the artists working with the Vancouver cultural landscape have become much more renowned than any of its architects.

<sup>16</sup> Windsor Liscombe, *op. cit.*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Doug Shadbolt's book on Thom eschews the early work in favour of the later lavish projects such as the Frum House in Toronto and the institutional work such as the ornate Massey College, and includes no information on Thom's own house—a significant lapse in the study of an architect's work.





**RITCHIE RESIDENCE** (Ned Pratt, 1950)

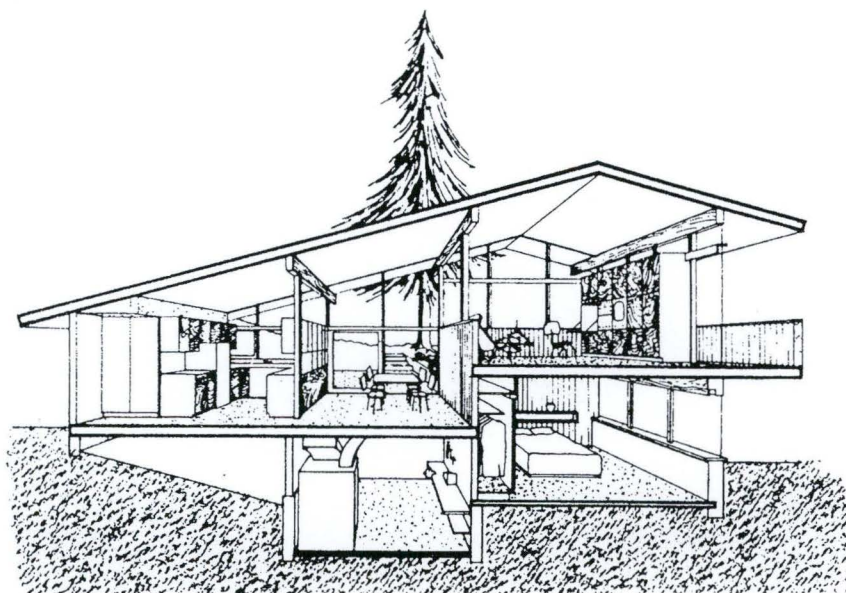
Pratt was an early proponent of the post-and-beam system that lets interior partitions float freely in space. While the structure allows for an open plan, the exterior was set by the width of the plywood panel cladding. The plywood spandrels alternate with full height-glazing modules to create a pavilion-like feeling, a building of great transparency and clarity. Pratt was doing in wood what Mies was doing in steel. The house exploits the power of the large, single sheets of glass to express the modern. The flat roof extends well beyond the walls, supported by the exposed beams below; the roof edge is thin, emphasizing its planar quality, which distinguishes it from the heftier appearance of his Wright influenced colleagues.



**THOM HOUSE** (Ron Thom, 1952)

This compact house was featured in a *Canadian Homes and Garden* article, "Experimental Home," in June of 1953. It is a sleek composition of plywood panels and fine horizontals, and a departure from his usual picturesque mode. The single storey design is functionally arranged, bedrooms separated from the living-dining zone by an open "family" area and services core. An experiment in construction, the house took just two weeks to erect once the slab was poured. The exterior alternates plywood panels with full-height glazing between the visible posts. Where interior space connects to outdoor terraces, the roof beams extend out and support simple trellises, again without adornment. Thom's rendering suggests a Miesian influence in its modular regularity and direct expression of the structural frame. Even the column made of standard lumber was perhaps derived from a contemplation of the cross-shaped steel column of Mies' Barcelona pavilion. The kitchen, which may have been ample in the 1950s, is like the galleys with flipdown appliances often used by Mies, and seems more a passage than a room of its own.





*Western Holmes & Living*, August 1954, page 11

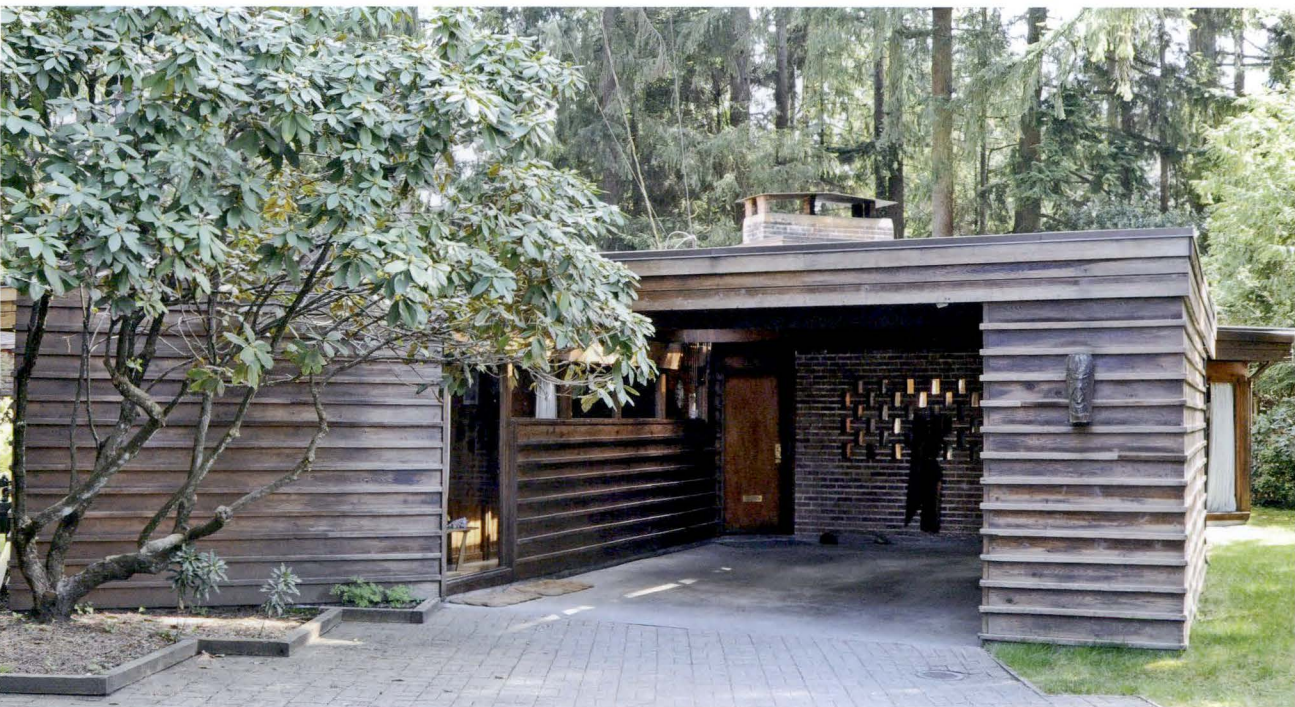
**TREND HOUSE** (Porter & Davidson Architects, 1954)

Built as a display house to promote BC wood, it was decorated by Eaton's and the National Gallery of Canada. The post-and-beam construction punctuates the space but has minimal impact on the plan. The structure is used as a tactical means for creating space. The prominent roof is pitched like a chalet, no doubt to complement the mountain setting, and also reflects the split-level layout. The plan appears very modern—the entire top floor living area is without walls—while at the same time the house is clearly divided into living room, dining room, kitchen, like a Victorian “grand dame” despite the modernity of its expanses of glass. The front and side are wrapped by a deck much like a traditional verandah. The house nestles in its sloped site, but the flow remains primarily visual. Clearly its role as a marketing tool for the suburban developer meant the house had to have broad appeal. This prototype was often used by builders, and there are numerous variations on the theme in the near area.



**BOBAK HOUSE** (architect unknown, 1953-1955)

Any trace of the handmade is eliminated in this strictly panelized facade, apparently made with plywood stressed skin construction that explores the benefits of prefabricated, off-site, industrial building. The grouping of windows into continuous horizontal bands is somehow reminiscent of Le Corbusier's strip windows; this is no “free façade,” but a tightly ordered exercise in rational production and thus similar to Neutra's aluminum skin panels but rendered in plywood. The two-storey volume has little to do with the ground-hugging of the picturesque, and there seems no attempt to create an organic relationship to the site, underlined by the manner in which the house is entered from a short bridge. The front door appears to lead into a double-height circulation space.



**Moon House** (Fred Hollingsworth, 1950)

An encampment in nature, this post-and-beam house of two interconnected pavilions uses the “Neoteric” system adapted from Wright’s populist Usonian houses. An organic plan, the pavilions sit at 45 degrees to the property line so as to appropriate the exterior as well-defined outdoor rooms. The spatial sequence flows from inside to the wooded setting outside and straight back in again, creating intimate spaces. The built-in interior furniture reflects modernist cabin-style. The exterior wood treatment with its alternating wide and narrow strips of unfinished cedar references log-cabin construction as well as Wright, evident in flourishes like the wood lighting fixture at the entrance.





**NAIRNE HOUSE** (Ronald Nairne, 1956)

Nairne was a young partner at the prestigious firm of McCarter & Nairne where Erickson and Shadbolt also worked. This house synthesizes numerous influences: post and beam as well as load-bearing brick; floating panels and screens; a somewhat Miesian plan, with pronounced fin walls; and a Wright-like living room with prominent fireplace. Laid out on an 8' module, the house includes an open plan living area, a conventionally planned sleeping wing with extensive corridors, and a screened entrance court connecting to the carport. "Louvered fencing surrounds the whole house—giving it an intriguing oriental appearance." (*Western Homes and Living*, July 1958) If we understand the refinement of the regional style to be a gradual process of addition and subtraction, we can now see that Nairne added too many disparate elements to the mix and did not cut away the superfluous.



**BARNES RESIDENCE** (Hartley & Barnes, 1960)

Fine interlocking of a spatially open volume that still seems to have a lot of solid walls. Very disciplined formal project of high ambition. Also a marriage of the vernacular of the cheap and easy construction and a sophisticated formal theorem. But definitely, at the same time a straightforward, utilitarian, or even 'functionalist' plan. The idea of the separate deck off the kitchen is an interesting notion, the kitchen becomes a sort of independent domain. The woman's role is spatially acknowledged. The vertical siding also differentiates it from the bungalow-Wrightian horizontality of Birmingham's 1946 Walters residence and makes it look like something that could have been built just now. The projecting carport and shaped stair volume are reminiscent of early modernists like Le Corbusier.



**PERRY HOUSE** (Arthur Erickson, 1963)

The Perry house deploys Erickson's signature elements—the post and lintel—in a synthesis of Asian and European tectonics. There is hardly a façade or elevation to orient our understanding of the place, the emphasis being primarily on the space created by the interplay between plan and site. Unfinished narrow cedar strips clad the exterior (vertical board and batten but without the boards). Verandah-like passages connect all interior and exterior spaces into a single sequence. It has the feel of a Japanese wood-frame house, but with space created by fixed walls rather than sliding partitions and screens. The pinwheel plan creates a sequence of exterior spaces, each with its own character and appropriate for different situations. Suspended between rationalism and abstraction, it references the cabin in the woods.