

**"The New Spirit : Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–65",
Exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, November 8 1997 –
January 18 1998**

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Exhibit Reviews

"The New Spirit : Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–65"

Exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery,

November 8 1997 – January 18 1998

Sherry McKay

School of Architecture, University of British Columbia

Playing to a home audience between November 8, 1997 and January 18, 1998, the "New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1965," won popular appeal as it regaled local visitors with the city's well-known as well as less-familiar buildings and practitioners, as exemplified by the inclusion of both the B. C. Electric Head Office by Thompson, Berwick and Pratt and the Sky Bungalow by Fred Hollingsworth. The exhibition, initiated at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in March 1997 and concluding at Calgary's Nickel Art Gallery in April 1998, is neither overwhelming in size, nor overly exclusive in its selection of material.

The propagation of a 'new spirit' in Vancouver's architecture is ambitiously encapsulated via a heterogeneous collection of renderings, presentation drawings, construction details, plans, sections and period documents — architectural journals and books, newspaper accounts and advertisements, the odd personal letter and an assortment of furniture. All are distributed through a succession of galleries where broadly drawn themes — corporate modernism, learning modernism, synthesis of the arts, the rational house, designs for living, aesthetics of the new townscape, etc. — attempt to manage the archival and popular material. While this thematic organization promises an approach more amenable to a lucid rendering of the multiple voices of modernity, this promise is somewhat compromised by a straining for a single consensual narrative to explain events and illuminate aesthetic issues that ran through the accompanying commentary and book. The exhibition, while highlighting some new players such as Catherine Chard Wisnicki, recounts through the selection of the material and its arrangement, the well-rehearsed narrative of the heroic endeavour of a group that included the painter Bert Binning and architects such as Robert Berwick, Ned Pratt, John Porter, Roy Jessiman, Arthur Erickson, and Ron Thom to bring modernism to the West Coast, a place seemingly unfettered by long-standing architectural traditions or by a climate inhospitable to modernism's flat roofs and glazed expanses. The book, by Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe, amplifies the array of disparate exhibits and offers a richly documented compendium of research material and sources ranging from the Canadian Architectural Archives at the University of Calgary to the personal archives of architects such as Erickson and Jessiman.

Clearly, the task of the curators was to weave together the material offered as a tribute to design, architecture and architects on the West Coast with themes largely borrowed from other places — the 1945 University of Manitoba Faculty of Architecture syllabus

from which the book gets its thematic concerns of equity, efficiency, and community, or Le Corbusier's *Radiant City* which lends a theoretical context to one section of the exhibition. But, from these very general references, it is difficult to pin down the distinctively new aspects of architectural production of the period in this particular place, especially when the architects drew their inspiration (Southern California, Sweden, England) and received their training (McGill, Toronto, London) in other places, and entered into diverse discourses (functionalism, organic form, community). It is perhaps the strength of this exhibition that it does present this material — the wonderful drawings by Wells Coates from the CCA, the citations from texts such as the journal *Western Homes and Living* which convey something of the ethos of the period, the architectural innovation that it rightly points to, the issues of community and education that it recalls. The exhibition has also garnered a sympathetic audience for architecture in the city. In this there is much to recommend of the exhibition. As well, the public response to the exhibition signals its subject as a site of general affection and nostalgia that begs investigation.

However, for an exhibition purporting to be devoted to the architecture of a city, there is an inexplicable focus on individual people, buildings, and events that makes the city itself elusive, the forces shaping it inscrutable. On the temporal plane, the period of the exhibition is defined by the appearance of Vancouver's first experimental Modernist houses in 1937–38 and 1965 when Modernism 'triumphed' with the building of Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, just outside Vancouver, and simultaneously declined into a 'formulaic, authoritarian, and dehumanizing' undertaking; its date of appearance appears aptly demarcated its date of demise is more nebulous. On the spatial plan, there is little conveyed of the social geography of the "new spirit," nothing of its congregation in places like the University of British Columbia Endowment Lands adjacent to the campus, West and North Vancouver, or, in the case of office blocks south rather than west of the old city core. For a modernist spirit that engaged with a regional locale, the absence of a clear representation of the topographical placement of these works, the commanding views they sought, the pioneering spirit often evoked in the housing and the localized rhetoric of the office buildings renders the new spirit somewhat evasive rather than explained. The presentation of the material is effusive, rather staid and uniform which, rather unfortunately, conveys more of

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the bureaucratic or normative side of modernism than of its innovative or imaginative thrust.

There is an anti-postmodernism evident in the exhibition as a whole; the singular narrative stance, the visual appropriation of First Nations' settlement patterns as a means to legitimate the northern new town of Kitimat, the avowed preference for suburban house design over social housing that was heralded by the Design for Living Group, the higher density and redevelopment of the city centre initiated by the 1956 by-law changes and the planned imposition of *tabula rasa* planning on the inner city neighbourhood of Strathcona, for example, are in the exhibition unquestioned in the interest in sustaining allegiance to the modernist rhetoric of building community. There are many occasional comments which tellingly point to other discourses and assumptions circulating among the modernist images, designs and texts. The exhibition draws our attention to the focus on middle class suburban homes and apartments rather than public housing that, we are told, distinguished North America from Europe, on the local responsiveness to an 'assertive new corporate world' and on the concern for a more unified aesthetic order for the cityscape, despite the fact that all of these meant social and economic exclusions within the revamped city. Are these values to be propagated by a nostalgic view to the past? Is the focus on this recent past sufficient to ward off the worst excesses of a post-industrial world? Although we may agree with architect Fred Lasserre's demand in the early 1950s that 'architecture should be socialized,' that should not deter a critical stance on what that socialization meant, architecturally and otherwise. While the ability, demonstrated in the exhibition, to

link the architectural production of Vancouver to events in New York (MOMA Exhibition of 1945) California (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Exhibition 1949) Marseilles (via a review of Le Corbusier's *Unité* in *Architectural Review*, June 1951) rescues the work from provincialism, it also serves to sever it from the immediate, regional political and social milieu in which it was produced; history is aestheticized. Likewise, the architecture itself is so fragmentary in its exhibited representation, and so dispersed in the myriad discourses of modernism in its textual presentation that its efficacy as aesthetic object is diminished. It is also one of the eccentricities of the exhibition that the universalizing, standardized, 'socialized' modernism pointed to throughout the exhibition is called into question by the concurrent modernism of 'contextual, expressive and organic approaches' called up at the very conclusion of the exhibition.

CCA director, Phyllis Lambert, remarks in her Foreword to the book that accompanies the exhibition that 'The New Spirit' exhibition is one in a series "intended to advance scholarship on the architectural definition of Canada's urban history ... [where] we hope to frame key questions for the scholar and excite critical interest in the richness of the subject at hand." Unquestionably, the exhibition will provoke the critical interest and scholarship that the subject of modernism in Vancouver, then and now, deserves. While it is appropriate to celebrate those responsible for good modern design, at some point a critical evaluation of the work will be necessary, one that takes into account its effects, exclusions and assumptions. This exhibition will have contributed greatly to Canadian architectural and cultural studies by calling that moment into being.