



**Rhodri Windsor Liscombe.** *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963.* Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1997. 208 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-55054-555-5.

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*The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963* was published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same title which was prepared by the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal. The exhibition was presented at the CCA this past spring, and will travel to the Vancouver Art Gallery this winter, November 8-January 18; it will complete its scheduled run at the Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary, February 13-April 19, 1998. I have not yet seen the exhibition, but, like many Vancouverites, I look forward to the opening with great anticipation. The CCA should be applauded for sponsoring an exhibition on this fascinating and vital period in architectural history in which the tenets of international Modernism were applied and altered within a vibrant local context. This exhibition is also on the forefront of a trend within the heritage community to push for the preservation of important Modernist buildings. It will amplify awareness of these issues, particularly in Vancouver where there is much to be preserved, and much being destroyed.

During the period in question, 1938-1963, Vancouver was seen nationally and internationally as a hotbed of Modernist design. Young architects, steeped in Modernist ideology, found clients-homeowners, developers, institutions, corporations-willing to experiment with new formal solutions to solve modern problems and to promote an image of progress. British Columbia's economy

was strong in the postwar period, so there was much construction to which these new ideals and techniques could be applied. In the introduction to the book, Adele Freedman is skeptical about how much influence West Coast Modernism actually had on the rest of Canada (though she does not go on to prove her point). Regardless, contemporary critics from Eastern Canada--such as Eric Arthur in the influential 1951 Massey Report- the U.S., Europe, and present-day curators recognized something exceptional about the buildings produced in B.C. at that time. *The New Spirit* attempts to explain what attracted critics, architects, and the public to West Coast Modernism.

The book is nicely designed, and the quality and comprehensive selection of the illustrations suggests that the exhibition will be a visual feast. However, on a technical note, the book could have been better edited. The names misspelled on the Acknowledgments page may seem like minor quibbles (except to their owners!); likewise the wrongly identified illustration.[1] What seems less excusable is that, at times, paragraph-long sentences lose the reader in a sea of ifs, ands, and thens (e.g. third paragraph, p. 108).

As with all his work, Dr. Windsor-Liscombe has presented a large amount of well researched material. Many interviews with surviving architects and others in the field during this period complement extensive work in public and personal archives. Many anecdotes, drawings, photo-

graphs and plans not before known to researchers have been unearthed. Windsor-Liscombe has truly mined the journals for every mention of West Coast buildings and architects, and he presents us with some gems. Of particular interest is the amount of attention Vancouver received in foreign journals like the *Architectural Forum* and *Architectural Review*. In one such article no less an authority than Nikolaus Pevsner--arguably the most famous architectural historian and critic of this century--rather backhandedly compliments Vancouver as the "parvenu" of Canadian cities (p. 15).

Speaking of Pevsner, his 1976 book *A History of Building Types* has influenced the organization of *The New Spirit*. Chapters Two-Four are named after three words describing the "modern architect" which Windsor-Liscombe has somewhat strangely plucked from the University of *Manitoba* school of architecture's 1945 syllabus: equity, community and efficiency. In *The New Spirit*, these three words refer roughly to building types: equity = social housing and planning, plus institutions like hospitals and schools; community = cultural institutions such as libraries and churches, and single-family dwellings; efficiency = the single-family-dwelling again (e.g. prefabrication and labour-saving devices), apartment buildings, and commercial buildings. This organization reflects a certain bias towards a rationalist history of classification--an attempt at least as old as Pevsner to re-make architectural history into a social science in response to critiques of the discipline's traditional aesthetic formalism. This typologic scheme results in two problems. First, the arbitrary nature of the categories; to me, any of the buildings could come under all three words. Second, the book's organization results in much chronological gambolling within the short period addressed by this book.

These problems are somewhat alleviated by the introductory first chapter which explains where these Modernist architects came from, and

what sort of environment they had in which to practice. In this chapter it soon becomes apparent that the author is an apologist for architectural Modernism, which, he reluctantly admits, has been under assault since the early 1960s for its totalizing schemes and monotonous facades (among other reasons). In its defense, Windsor-Liscombe states that, for instance:

"The transatlantic literary, pedagogical, and visual resources of Modernism presented to UBC architectural students was very far from being the universalist, authoritarian, sterile, anti-naturalistic, and anti-humanistic discipline attacked by later detractors" (p. 33).

While this is no doubt true, it cannot repair the rift experienced, then and now, between theory and practice of architecture. Still, it is gutsy that the author goes on in Chapter Two ("Equity"), for example, to defend the 1950 report by UBC sociologist Leonard Marsh, which outlined a total plan for Vancouver's impoverished and dilapidated East End neighbourhoods. The Marsh report advocated the total annihilation of Chinatown and Strathcona, and its replacement by various modernist housing schemes, most notably several high-rise towers. Three of these projects were actually built, replacing many blocks of Vancouver's original homes, before community activism prevented further destruction of the area. What seems missing from Windsor-Liscombe's analysis is a contextualization of this Modernist incursion into an immigrant neighbourhood; a neighbourhood that had become run-down after a 1930s by-law zoned it light industrial, thereby encouraging developer buy-outs and discouraging bank-lending for upkeep and renovation.[2] That Chinatown and Strathcona, as they have survived, are generally acknowledged to be Vancouver's most interesting and neighbourly communities, should be enough to discourage endorsements of the Marsh report and its subsequent plans.

However, Windsor-Liscombe's historical concerns are mainly biographical and aesthetic, as is

suggested by the large portion of Chapter one devoted to the education of the architects: who went and taught where, what pictures they looked at, and which of the great Modernists they idolized. The point of all this, as becomes clearer in the rest of the book, is to establish the place of Vancouver architects in the illustrious genealogy of Modernism. Time and again, Windsor-Liscombe recounts what he sees as each Vancouver building's antecedents among the icons of the Modern movement. An extreme case is his description of a neighbourhood branch of the Vancouver Public Library:

"In the Collingwood Branch, Semmens Simpson preferred a heightened functional pragmatism, informed by the larger contemporary architectural scene. The service functions are concentrated in a two-storey boarded section that is reminiscent of Neutra, Belluschi, and Portland architect John Yeon... The stone wall on the main front, reminiscent of Breuer, Soriano, and even Wright, adds visual interest, but in its sharp contrast with the sheer Miesian glazing alongside the entrance, it also evokes natural and thus humanistic values, and underscores the library's welcome" (p. 97).

For now we shall leave aside the conflation of natural with humanistic values, and how a stone wall can express those values as well as a sense of welcome. We can see that this type of writing is concerned with a blood-line for buildings, determining which are the legitimate inheritors of a stylistic heritage. This interest in the genuine, in attribution and antecedents, harkens back to the traditional relationship of art history with connoisseurship, wherein a painting's genealogy determines its market value.

The limitations of this approach have been exposed for some time in the history community: the separation of Architecture from mere building, which ignores a large (and growing) percentage of what is actually built; the idea of Architecture as self-referential art somehow distinct from social issues; and the associated problems of glori-

fying an individual artist/architect. Pevsner, the great practitioner of this formalist history, has long been critiqued for his determinist version of the history of Modernism, in which his outline goes directly from William Morris to Walter Gropius, discounting or ignoring important movements like the Chicago School and the Futurists. Windsor-Liscombe's analysis suffers from a similar malady. Interesting buildings are brushed aside if they do not represent the correct Miesian or Neutrish forms. An example is the Barber House of 1936, which is dismissed as "considerably less advanced" than some of the others built in the same period, though it has the planar concrete walls and abstract composition of forms that seem to define Modernism elsewhere in the book. The Capri Apartments, an essay in 1920s Corbusianism, does not rate a mention. For some reason, these buildings are illegitimate children of Modernism. Perhaps this is because neither were designed by the main proponents of the West Coast style delineated in this book.

Indeed, another effect of this blood-lining of architecture is that personalities are sometimes distorted to create heroes and villains: those who designed *important* buildings versus those who resisted the cultural progress inherent in Modernism. An example is Windsor-Liscombe's characterization of Charles J. Thompson and John McCarter, two successful Vancouver architects who had been in competition for decades, and who had always matched each other's proclivities for using the eclectic, historicist styles popular in the 1910s and 1920s. Windsor-Liscombe compares the two architects in the context of arguing for the Modernist designs their firms had produced for balking, conservative clients. For McCarter Nairne the client was Canada Post; for Sharp and Thompson, Berwick and Pratt it was the Bank of Montreal; for both it was, as Windsor-Liscombe suggests, "a long and largely futile struggle" (p. 166). Nevertheless, the "diplomatic C.J. Thompson was able to salvage S & TBP's valuable association with BM ... even as he continued to try out new ideas" (p.

166). On the other hand, for Vancouver's General Post Office the "magisterial J.Y. McCarter, Edwardian by training and inclination," was "too willing to accept the tepid compromise of the federal Department of Public Works between latter-day eclecticism and emasculated Modernism" (p. 163). In reality, both firms accepted similar compromises, as must almost any architect working for an institutional client in any era or style. This characterization also ignores other information, the most obvious being McCarter Nairne's other institutional projects of the period. For example, the firm's 1948-49 Toronto Dominion Bank on Granville Street sports on its rational facade the concrete *brises soleils* that Windsor-Liscombe has McCarter arch-conservatively stripping from the Modernist post office originally drawn by the youthful progressives at his firm.[3] The reason behind glorifying and vilifying two relatively similar careers is that Thompson's firm is seen here as the breeding ground for an important strain of West Coast Modernism: one which passes down from Thompson to his young partners Berwick and Pratt, and then to others within the firm such as Ron Thom and Arthur Erickson.

There are other concerns with this book as well, such as the author's deficient representation of women and women's issues. For instance, in the introductory chapter there is a section entitled "Reservations About Modernism." The sole example given of resistance to Modern architecture is that of a narrow-minded woman who insists on Georgian style for her home. Here Windsor-Liscombe describes the style battle over the UBC president's house in 1945-47. The initial design was a "strikingly Modernist scheme," but the president's wife "had no compunction in pushing her aesthetic views" on Thompson, Berwick and Pratt. In fact, "thanks to Mrs. MacKenzie's tenacious 'idea of Georgian style' the commission was put on hold until 1949" (p. 52). The language clearly characterizes Margaret MacKenzie as a stereotypical, overbearing rich wife. Later, in Chapter four ("Efficiency"), "The Modern Woman" receives her

own short chapter describing her role in the culture of Modernism. Other than a brief quote from architect Catherine Chard Wisnicki, the Modern woman gets little voice of her own. The section focuses on the representation of women in home magazine articles and advertisements as queens of their new efficient kitchens. The author, however, confuses what he calls the Modernist legacy of "women in the design process" (p. 146) with the actual role represented in the magazines—that of the Modern woman in the process of consumption, a fairly typical role given women by historians.

In the end, the closest this book comes to social history is some aged Vancouver architects reminiscing about the zeitgeist. Perhaps this follows the nature of the traditional exhibition catalogue which presents individual artists and their works. Still, *The New Spirit* states its goal as "contextualizing" Vancouver Modernism, which, to many of today's architectural historians, would mean a deep analysis of social effects on design decisions. Those historians would be disappointed with Dr. Windsor-Liscombe's effort. But an exhibition catalogue is written for a broad audience of gallery visitors. Would this book satisfy the public expectations of exhibitions and of architectural and art history? Perhaps, but one wonders whether genealogies and the name-dropping of famous (and not so famous) buildings are as comprehensible to the general public as a detailed explanation of, say, changing demographics and cultural imperatives, and how these more familiar forces affect architecture. Is it meaningful to compare some early Vancouver Modernist houses to the obscure Villa de Mandrot by Le Corbusier (p. 43)? While Le Corbusier is well-known, I for one have never heard of this particular villa, and know nothing of its design or appearance. In fact, after a bit of searching in the Corbusian literature, I could only find one mention of the Villa de Mandrot, and that in one of the many volumes that comprise the *Complete Works* of the architect. I would argue that displays of arcane knowledge

are more likely to alienate the general reader. This type of writing cannot (as is nobly hoped in Phyllis Lambert's "Foreword" to this book) invite "general readers to recognize their relationship to architecture" (p. 6). Nevertheless, as a scholarly work, *The New Spirit* will invite lively debate, and it will serve well as a basis for further research and historical analysis.

Notes:

[1]. The caption for Figure 87 reads "John Porter house under construction, 1947-48." The *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* (Sept. 1950), from which the three illustrations were taken, identifies the two separate buildings shown as the Smith House and the Craighead House, both by architect Ned Pratt. Dr. Windsor-Liscombe specifically discusses (p. 117) how the John Porter house does not have a flat roof; the houses in Figure 87 are flat-roofed.

[2]. See John Atkin, *Strathcona: Vancouver's First Neighbourhood*. Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1994, p. 60.

[3]. Interviews by Harold Kalman with John McCarter and William Leithead (Oct. 24, 1972), and with Bob Berwick and Ned Pratt (June 29, 1973), owned by the Canadian Architectural Archives, University of Calgary Library, also reveal some interesting points about McCarter and Thompson that may contradict Windsor-Liscombe's analysis. Both Berwick and Pratt are in agreement that the elderly Thompson had a very difficult time absorbing the tenets of Modernism that the two of them introduced to the practice. In his interview, McCarter refuses to discuss styles, instead holding fast to the primacy of the rational plan determining the building, a fully Modernist basis for design.

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