

architecture

Rediscovering Modernist Architecture

by Dianne Mackay

Anyone walking around the North Shore has seen many examples of modernist architecture — probably without even knowing it!

Modernism was one of the most influential forms of architecture in the post-World War II period; it was a dominant force in the development of Vancouver and the North Shore region. Many of the public buildings and private dwellings that we now take for granted once represented the cutting edge of architectural design. Ignored for years, modernism has been brought back into public consciousness with an exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery, *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963*.

Modernism was born in the 1930s, a fusion of Europe's International style with the revolutionary designs of American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

The International style evolved after World War I. The Great War, as it was known, devastated European cities and bankrupted the economies of many European countries. People in Europe were forced to rebuild their cities in the most cost-efficient way possible. Hence, the development of the International style, which emphasized functional architecture and was made from affordable materials.

The new style eschewed all forms of non-essential ornamentation in favour of simple, utilitarian designs. Buildings constructed in this style had flexible, open floor plans and flat roofs that allowed the interior space to be used as efficiently as possible. Windows, often arranged in horizontal bands, made use of the sun's natural light and gave buildings a more open appearance.

Modernism also reflected the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright was known for his ability to integrate his building with the natural environment. With his design for the Fallingwater home, for example, Wright actually built a house that sat on top of a natural waterfall! His use of geometric forms, simple structural techniques, and open floor plans influenced the designs of Internationalist architects and, consequently, later modernist architects.

Modernist design was based on more than a quest for functionalism: it also grew out of a desire for social equality. Modernism was, in a sense, a form of social activism. Architects believed that everyone had the right to live in a clean, efficient environment. Careful design, whether in public buildings or private homes, would improve people's lives by creating pleasant living spaces.

Design could also break down class barriers. Architects applied the same modernist principles in their designs for expensive, privately commissioned homes as they used in the cheap pre-fabricated dwellings built for people of more modest means.

Of all the cities in Canada, it was Vancouver that was to be most closely associated with the modernist movement. Vancouver was a young city at the end of World War II, a place where architects could experiment with concepts that would not have been accepted in older cities.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, modernist architects, most of them from eastern Canada and Europe, descended on Vancouver and set to work transforming it into a modern city.

The rise of modernism coincided with increased demand for housing and public facilities. After World War II, an influx of veterans and, later, immigrants, made cheap, well-designed housing a matter of urgent necessity. Given this situation, Vancouverites, like their European counterparts at the end of World War I, embraced architectural ideas that promoted quick, functional, and low-cost development.

Vancouver's natural setting attracted modernists, as the region's mild climate and wilderness environment — the mountains, forests, and oceans of the West Coast — provided architects with an exciting and challenging setting in which to try out new designs.

West Vancouver is home to



The Porter House