

communiqué /press release**For immediate release****The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963**

From 5 March to 25 May 1997

In the Main Galleries

Montréal, 5 mars 1997 – The Canadian Centre for Architecture presents ***The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963***, second in a series of three exhibitions devoted to the Canadian city, from 5 March to 25 May 1997. This exhibition focuses on the years following the Second World War, when Vancouver emerged as a city with a particularly vital and progressive architectural culture, adapting the ideology, aesthetics, and materials of the modern movement to such local conditions as dynamic growth, a dramatic landscape, and a surge of new building. Vancouver's modernist spirit is seen in such symbols of corporate prosperity as Sharp and Thompson Berwick Pratt's B.C. Electric tower; in such model public services as Semmens Simpson's new central library; in the enlightened housing experiments of the Design for Living group; and, finally, in the inventive new blending of site and structure in the houses of Arthur Erickson and Ron Thom.

The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963 looks at key buildings and projects from this exhilarating epoch in Vancouver's history – many now demolished, others seriously threatened by reckless development – through design drawings, photographs of the period, furniture and decoration. Focusing on five aspects of modernization – rethinking the urban form; formulating a modern image for business; reforming the home; democratizing and functionalizing public and educational buildings; and finding a new relationship between house and landscape – the exhibition charts the movement towards an aesthetic of openness, efficiency, and purposeful design.

"This revisiting of a largely forgotten chapter is especially timely," said Phyllis Lambert, director of the CCA, in announcing the exhibition. "It is essential to revive the central Modernist idea that intelligent design can advance important social goals; to examine the dynamics behind the movement of cultural ideas from the international to the regional sphere; and to remind Canadians of the quality and importance of Vancouver's Modernist heritage."

Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe, professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia, is the guest curator for this exhibition. In assembling over 300 objects for the exhibition he has culled the memories, attics and garages of local architects and their families to locate a wealth of drawings, photographs, works of art and furniture, nearly all now seen for the first time, and all dramatically expressive of Vancouver's "new spirit."

"Vancouver in 1946 was still a small provincial town on the margin of the nation and continent," Windsor-Liscombe states. "Yet wartime production had established a substantial industrial and technical base, in addition to expanding the existing resource based economy. A high proportion of Canadian veterans, including architects Duncan McNab and Arthur Erickson, were drawn with other 'seekers of the new life' to the more habitable climate, less conventional social environment and economic potential of the region. The result was a pressing need for housing and social infrastructure. These needs corresponded with the democratic and functional ideals of modernism, and with the new aesthetics advanced by such local cultural agencies as the Art in Living Group – founded by Fred Amess and B.C. Binning – and the C.B.C., and by local artists, such as Gordon Smith and Jack Shadbolt, who commissioned many of the most adventurous homes of the postwar era."

As this progressive professional and cultural environment became established, it attracted architects of wide international experience. Frederic Lasserre, Swiss born graduate of the University of Toronto, who had worked in London with the renowned TECTON group and taught at McGill University, came in 1946 as head of the new Department of Architecture at the University of B.C. Wells Coates, an alumnus of U.B.C., who helped found the British MARS group and had been active in the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne,

was brought to Vancouver in 1956 as consultant for a light rapid transit system. Their contributions were matched by talented native born or trained architects, ranging from Peter Thornton, a graduate of the Architectural Association, to Ned Pratt and Bob Berwick, alumni of the University of Toronto School of Architecture and leading partners in Sharp and Thompson Berwick Pratt, a firm which served as the training ground for those of the next generation (like Fred Hollingsworth and Ron Thom), who evolved their own interpretations of modernism – the so-called 'West Coast Style'."

What made Vancouver so remarkable in the postwar years was its routine commitment to thoughtful and progressive design. The city came to demand a level of quality not just for great monuments or from architectural geniuses but in everyday buildings, by workaday architectural offices, for otherwise unremarkable clients. This was a civic culture committed to good architecture and unwilling to stand for less. Architects active at the time will remember the period as one of questioning, experimentation, and realism, always directed to the enhancement of the physical environment for human well-being. Such architects explored the practical relevance of theoretical models, and regarded the harnessing of scientific and technological developments as a practical and essential part of their solutions. Above all, they believed that architecture must assume a central role in the construction and enrichment of the social order. As Windsor-Liscombe puts it, "Their overriding desire was to make of architecture a great humanistic experience." The same "new spirit" underlies the many innovative young Vancouver practices that are now gaining national and international recognition.

This exhibition is the second in a series of three exhibitions devoted to the Canadian city, which began with ***Power and Planning: Industrial Towns in Québec, 1890–1950*** in spring 1996. ***The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963*** will be followed from 4 March to 24 May 1998 by ***Montréal Métropole 1888–1931***, a study of the architectural and social forces that transformed an 18th and 19th century commercial city into the metropolitan centre of Canada in the 20th.

Catalogue

In conjunction with the exhibition, the CCA will publish, jointly with Douglas & McIntyre, *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963* written by Rhodri Windsor Liscombe with an introduction on modernism in Canada by Adele Freedman. The 208-page book, featuring 164 illustrations, traces the development of modernist architecture in Vancouver and looks at the design and social issues behind 25 years of sophisticated and distinctive architectural exploration.

Guided tours

Guided tours introducing the main themes of the exhibition ***The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963*** are offered every Saturday at 2:30 pm in French and 3:30 pm in English and Sunday at 2:30 pm in English and 3:30 pm in French, from 15 March to 25 May 1997 (reservations are not required). As well, exhibition tours for groups of 10 or more are available during regular museum hours. All reservations for groups must be made two weeks in advance (514-939-7000, extension 2504) and exhibition entrance fees apply.

Travelling schedule

After its presentation at the CCA from 5 March to 25 May 1997, the exhibition ***The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938–1963*** will be presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery from 1 October 1997 to 4 January 1998, and at The Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary, from February to April 1998.

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The CCA also thanks Bell Canada and Teleglobe Canada Inc. for their contributions in support of its 1997 exhibition program.

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