



# 3956 WESTRIDGE AVENUE

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

FEBRUARY 2015

**DONALD LUXTON**  
AND ASSOCIATES INC 

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: RAY HOUSE



**Address:** 3956 Westridge Avenue, West Vancouver

**Name:** Ray House

**Architect:** Daniel Evan White

**Builder:** Fiscus Construction

**Original Owner:** Julian Ray

**Date of Construction:** 1961

### DESCRIPTION OF THE HISTORIC PLACE

The Ray House, located at 3956 Westridge Avenue, is a tri-level residence built atop a rugged landscape composed of stepped and sloping bedrock. The property is situated along the Caulfeild Plateau in the District of West Vancouver. Designed in 1961 in a Japanese inspired, Modernist approach to West Coast architecture, the Ray House features a heavily glazed top storey, which gives the illusion of weightlessness, characterized by its cross-gabled roof, thin soffits, and tapered exposed beams. The house is anchored by its more generous and less transparent lower levels. Located on a 23,000 square foot residential lot with south facing views, the Ray House is distinguished by its unique design and thoughtful integration with the natural environment.

### HERITAGE VALUE OF THE HISTORIC PLACE

The Ray House is significant for its Modernist response to West Coast architecture, unique among the houses designed in West Vancouver at the time, and for its integration with the surrounding natural environment and rocky sloped site. The Ray House is also valued for its association with celebrated local architect, Daniel Evan White, who designed the Ray House for Julian Ray in 1961, at the beginning of what would become a long and successful career for White.

Exemplified by design innovation, use of natural materials, and sensitive integration with the landscape, the West Coast Modern Style of architecture was prevalent between 1945 and 1970. This was an era of postwar optimism, prosperity, growth and pent-up demand for new housing. The Ray House is a unique, Japanese-inspired representation of this new modern architecture, and features tapered exposed beams and thin soffits that give the impression that the top level of the house is floating above ground, an effect that is intensified by the bridge that leads to the

front entryway. Utilizing high-quality materials, including the application of cedar on both the interior and exterior, the house features sophisticated lines that give it an organic sense of flow while differentiating it from earlier post-and-beam structures. The interior of the top floor features expansive windows and vaulted ceilings that intensify the feeling of openness. The house is anchored to the rocky landscape as it follows the natural topography of the land to the rear yard – the exterior walls become more solid and opaque while the house expands to include generous, and private, living quarters. The central chimney, which is split in two, functions as the heart of the house and connects two unique fireplaces, one on the top floor and one in the master bedroom.

Built on a large residential lot, the Ray House is significant for its sensitive and thoughtful integration with the natural environment, a hallmark feature of the West Coast Modern Style. The multiple levels of the house were constructed around, as opposed to through, the natural bedrock, creating a tiered massing that is incorporated into the steep lot with minimal disruption of the rugged landscape. The design allows for maximum, and diverse, views to and from the house and takes advantage of natural light. By designing a ‘floating’ top level, White’s design creates an infinite sense of space, which gives the impression that the house is hovering amidst the trees.

The Ray House is valued for its association with prominent local architect, Daniel Evan White (1933-2012). Educated at the Vancouver School of Art, White initially planned on becoming a painter, but turned to another art form upon entering UBC’s School of Architecture in the 1950s. Architecture school exposed Daniel to an influential group of instructors and mentors including Bertram Charles (B.C.) Binning, Ron Thom, Frederick Lasserre, Cornelia Oberlander, and Arthur Erickson; he completed his thesis in 1963 at the age of thirty and was hired as Erickson’s first employee not long afterward. Recognized by his contemporaries as one of the most accomplished architects of his generation, Daniel White developed his own, distinguishable style, which included bold, geometric designs, sculptural exteriors, and a heavy use of wood and glass. Throughout his career, White was known for his relentless hard work, his commitment to his own design beliefs and his desire to avoid influence from architectural trends.

Early in his architectural career, while still at school, White became affiliated with Fiscus Construction; a company formed by seven UBC students for which White initially designed a pre-fabricated cottage. This early work allowed White to tangibly explore his approach to design, which, at times, referenced his appreciation of Japanese residential architecture, likely an influence from Arthur Erickson. White would go on to design homes for all four of the lawyers involved in Fiscus Construction, including this home, designed for Julian Ray in 1961 and built by Fiscus using their standardized panel system. Designed while White was still completing his degree, the Ray House expresses his strong architectural voice, characterized by references to Japanese design, the incorporation of dramatic shapes and angles, the union of interior and exterior spaces, the bold articulation of basic architectural concepts and the creation of a form and massing that reads as both simple and complex – all at a wholly livable and human-scale.

## **CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS**

The elements that define the heritage character of the Ray House are its:

### Exterior Elements

- setting amongst mature vegetation on a large lot, with views to the southwest;
- residential form, scale and massing as expressed by its tri-level plan, one storey visible at the entry way and three levels visible from the sides and rear façade;
- low sloped, cross-gabled roof structure, with thin soffits and tapered exposed beams;
- wood frame construction with cedar and stucco siding;
- Modernist style details such as the use of local materials, thin soffits, wide eaves and tapered exposed wooden beams, landscaped path and bridge leading to the front entryway, several balconies and decks, boxed window assemblies, and the relationship between the interior and exterior spaces;
- original windows such as its large fixed and sliding casement wood frame and sash windows of the living room, and quarter-reeled glass sidelights at the front entry;
- twin interior granite chimneys; and
- associated landscape features such as the mature trees and plants, the landscaped pathway leading to the bridge with mature plantings and rock sculptures, and the natural bedrock.

### Interior Elements

- tri-level floor plan with split-level concept;
- glazed top storey with vaulted ceilings and tapered exposed beams that continue through the interior;
- two fireplaces including: top storey two-sided fireplace book-ended by granite chimneys, and master bedroom fireplace with trapezoidal metal hood and floating granite base;
- horizontal cedar cladding;
- floating cedar staircase with cedar balustrades;
- sliding pocket doors to the master bedroom deck;
- exposed granite wall in the master closet;
- woven wood screens; and
- wall beneath the staircase composed of round balusters.

## IMAGES AND PLANS



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: RAY HOUSE, 3956 WESTRIDGE AVENUE, WEST VANCOUVER



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: RAY HOUSE, 3956 WESTRIDGE AVENUE, WEST VANCOUVER



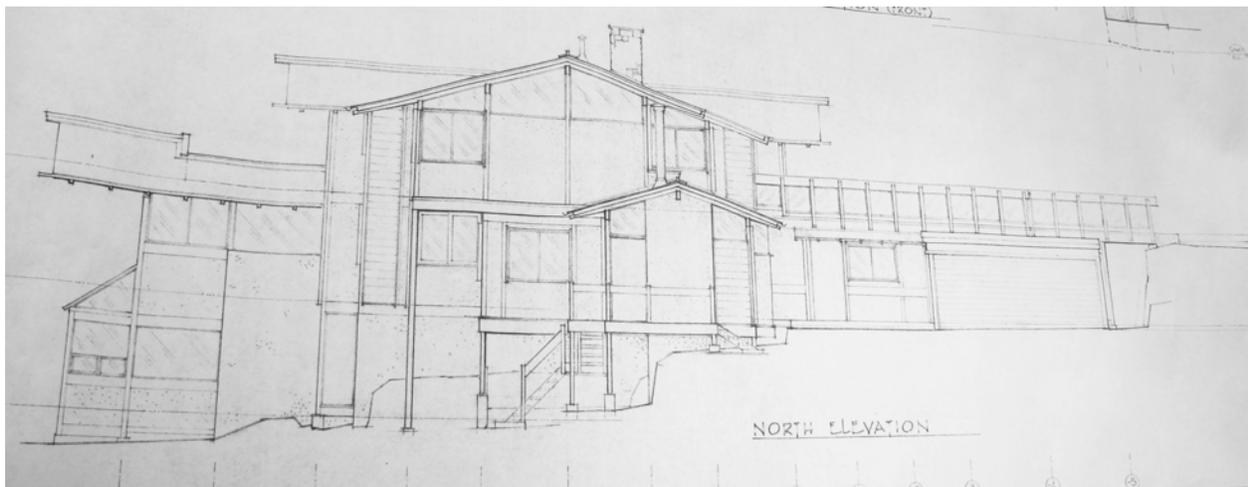
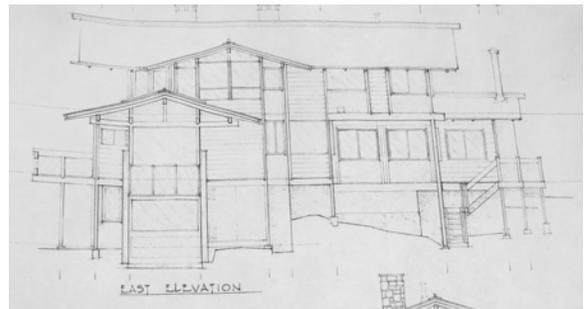
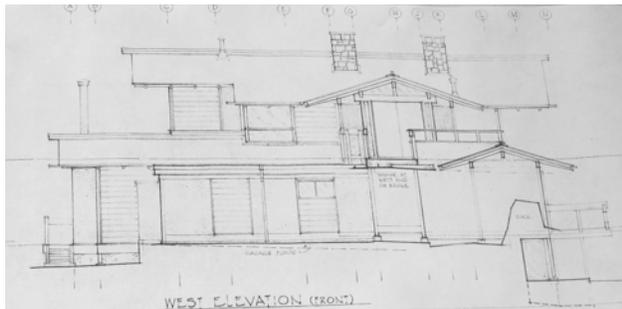
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: RAY HOUSE, 3956 WESTRIDGE AVENUE, WEST VANCOUVER



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: RAY HOUSE, 3956 WESTRIDGE AVENUE, WEST VANCOUVER



Daniel Evan White, Museum of Vancouver



Fiscus Construction plans, 1993

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

- Interview with Russell Cammarasana, February 11, 2015
- Fiscus Construction plans, 1993
- “The Many Mansions of Dan White”. *Western Living*. May 1985. Article attached as Appendix.
- “Natural Wonder: Canadian Architect Daniel Evan White”. *Wallpaper\** December 2011. Article attached as Appendix.
- Museum of Vancouver ‘Who was Daniel Evan White’, posted by Viviane Gosselin, October 09, 2013, <http://www.museumofvancouver.ca/programs/blog/2013/10/9/who-was-daniel-evan-white-part-i> Transcript below:

**Viviane Gosselin (MOV Curator): Why do you think Daniel Evan White remained relatively unknown until recently – well after his career was over?**

Martin Lewis (Guest Curator): Many of Dan’s mentors or contemporaries – Arthur Erickson, Ron Thom, Barry Downs – managed to complement their early private residential work with larger institutional commissions that afforded them greater public profiles. Others, such as Fred Hollingsworth and Bud Wood, were far more vocal and articulate about their own work. Dan had the respect of his professional peers but was never skilled at self-promotion.

**VG: Last year, there was a West Coast Modern film screening and public symposium in Vancouver but, curiously, not a mention of Dan White. Should he be considered part of that movement or not?**

Greg Johnson (Guest Curator): We acknowledge that Dan never identified with a style or group per se, nor can his work be easily categorized. It’s often mistakenly characterized as simply architecture for the privileged. That is incorrect. He also designed modest houses, pre-fabricated cabins – everything from furniture and fixtures to new housing prototypes, public buildings and small communities.

**VG: Given his formal education at the Vancouver School of Art, would you say Dan White considered himself an artist, an architect, or both?**

ML: He said he became an architect because he ‘could not paint like those he admired’. He understood his limitations. Yet he certainly approached architecture with the sensibility of an artist. He was not pleased until he achieved ‘something that was truly beautiful’. So, he was quite willing to take everyone on a quest for the zenith. He was very interested in Greek mythology and pursued the ideals of intense dedication, passion and zeal (naming his business after the god Zeus, who represented those ideals). He was an idealist, a dreamer. Those are not necessarily the typical traits of a successful architect.

**VG: Big question: Could you situate his work in local, regional, national and international contexts?**

GJ: We view him as one of the most accomplished architects of his generation. His unique contribution to Canadian architecture will become more significant and revered as his work is publicized and understood as a genuinely original, West Coast response to site, climate and culture. Although the buildings reveal an iconic, almost sculptural presence from the exterior, their clear interior planning and the precise relationships of rooms to the immediate and distant landscape set them apart.

ML: He had an interest in the modernist tenets (Le Corbusier’s ‘5 Points of Architecture’; Mies van der Rohe’s ‘Less is More’) but never as dogma or formula. His work, although strongly geometric in plan and section, is much more subtly nuanced and human-scaled than would at first appear. He

was quite sympathetic to the fusion of inside and outside, to the extent that those territorial boundaries are constantly blurred in his houses – air, water, light, landscape seem to flow effortlessly from one space to another...

**VG: You both already had an intimate knowledge of his work, having been associates in his firm for several years. What new insights did you gain while researching and documenting his work?**

ML: Architecture, like all disciplines, seems to have its own set of very strict rules and tendencies. Some would call them styles, others theoretical positions. We're interested in the idea of critical practice, which attempts to posit larger issues through the true substance of architecture – which, some might argue, is building. Dan was clearly a practitioner. He was not a theorist. He communicated ideas through the act of building.

GJ: The truly humbling thing about looking at his 50 years of practice, as a coherent body of work, is just how difficult it must have been to execute. Dan quietly had a formal agenda in mind, perhaps not articulated initially, but certainly as he gained more experience and earned the confidence and trust of clients; he was able to assemble a coherent set of ideas, each project more subtly resolved than the previous one. It was as if he was working towards completing that set and saw in each commission an opportunity to add an additional piece to the suite.

ML: Absolutely. And in retrospect, it is the research process required for the exhibition that made us see the work in this light. It allowed us to type and categorize projects and document their formal similarities. Interestingly, there is a lineage that ties everything together, so to speak – private worlds that suddenly become public and more interesting because of their shared genealogy. We are certainly not historians, but as architects we now see the merit in constructing a career based on a few selective and focused interests.

GJ: The most rewarding part of this project has been meeting an extraordinarily wide range of people who, after having been in the residences for a significant amount of time, in some cases several decades, are now reflecting on how good architecture has changed their lives.

**VG: When did you first learn about Dan White?**

ML: Through a University of Toronto acquaintance, who became Dan's longest associate, of more than 25 years – Russell Cammarasana. I had noticed the Ma Residence on Spanish Banks when I first came to Vancouver in 1986, because of its sheer audacity and obvious dexterity. But years later, when visiting Russell at the studio, I think Dan mentioned that they were getting very busy and needed some help. It was completely circumstantial. I worked and consulted with Dan's firm intermittently over a period of 20 years and had the opportunity to work with Dan on his very last project (unbuilt) in 2010.

GJ: I remember the first time I saw one of Dan White's houses, soon after returning from my architectural studies in Montréal. The house was located on one of those rugged West Coast sites so impossible to build on that it had likely been labelled as unsuitable for development: steep, rocky slopes descending to the ocean, very difficult vehicle access and covered with impenetrable vegetation.

Although still incomplete, the house already exhibited those characteristics so typical of all of Dan's work – bold, simple and dramatic, with strong, repetitive, geometric forms, fitted to the site in a manner that made it look like it had always been there.

I was fortunate at that time to be sharing office space with Steve Zibin, a long-time colleague of Dan. Steve always spoke so highly of Dan, crediting him with instilling in Steve a strong sense of design. He sent me off in search of the many buildings they had worked on together, most of them hidden away on difficult-to-access sites around the Great Vancouver area. I became familiar with

the large body of exceptional work Dan's office had produced, and at the same time more puzzled as to why these outstanding projects were not better known within the architectural community. Through an amazing twist of fate shortly thereafter, I found myself working with Dan and a number of his colleagues. The office was a wonderfully creative atmosphere, and I remember it with fondness, as much for the people involved as for the fascinating way in which Dan's projects came to fruition.

**VG: And what was it like to work with him?**

ML: Exhilarating. Inspiring. Frustrating. Humbling. Dan was a very quiet, gentle man. I think that those who worked for him, and with him, realized that they were operating in a completely different world of design, mostly anachronistic, completely unsustainable when you come to think of it. It's remarkable that Dan was able to maintain a practice such as his for so long. For any project, he would generate hundreds of ideas. Some of the ideas were so unconventional at the residential scale (houses spanning deep gorges, suspended spherical rooms, hyperbolic paraboloid skylit roofs) that when first proposed, they seemed like conceits, sheer follies. But then, slowly, as the client's program evolved and the siting, spatial and technical requirements became more known and considered, those poetic ideas transformed into practical, productive ones. Dan was immensely talented. And in a way not borne out by his daily studio behaviour (he actually did not draw so much as sketch relentlessly). He was extremely hard working. He was always dreaming. He never took a day off.

**VG: What lessons do you think can be learned from his work?**

ML: Anyone who has striven for simplicity and clarity in any discipline knows how difficult those are to achieve. Dan worked relentlessly, attempting to achieve a measure of perfection. He was rarely successful, but he persisted. He wasn't afraid to make mistakes. He constructed space, spatial sequence, form. Complex space that rewarded full engagement.

GJ: Dan's best work was executed when he engaged a broad range of participants with multidisciplinary backgrounds, each substantially contributing to the final artefact. This model, distinct from the antiquated myth of the sole creative genius, is the one most likely to produce outstanding architecture.

ML: What drove the formal language of Dan's work was his insistence that everything was simple, geometrically consistent and carried through all levels of the architectural program. No other architect in this region successfully carried out that idea at such a scale, with such thoroughness and over such a long period of time. We find that compelling. There are certainly high and low points in the opus: the work is neither 'perfect' nor always resolved. But it is shown here, for the first time, for consideration. No one could say that they 'know' Dan's work, because it just wasn't 'out there' before now. In fact, the curatorial team is discovering something new every day.

GJ: Ideas from his 1963 thesis – such as a clear formal vocabulary or the mix of the monumental with the everyday – resonate in his final project 50 years later; that's instructive.

ML: Our expectations of our buildings and environments are different now, implicated by a new awareness of energy conservation and vague notions of heritage and sustainability. You cannot, nor would you necessarily want to, replicate the buildings of the past 50 years. But you might be interested in what makes some of that architecture and landscape liveable, revered, cared for and loved. This is partly why we think Dan's work will continue to resonate with the public of today and tomorrow.

# THE MANY MANSIONS OF DAN WHITE

*In designing some of the West's finest examples of residential architecture, Dan White has quietly pursued excellence, but not fame. Story by Philip Marchand. Photography by Roger Brooks*

For 20 years, Daniel Evan White has been designing buildings out of a slightly decaying, two-storey house on Alberni Street, in the heart of Vancouver's West End. White is Vancouver's finest residential architect since Ron Thom — or, at the very least, the foremost practitioner of the exotic art described by fellow architect Ian Davidson as "doing palaces for the rich."

The first floor of the house has a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a toilet with an unhinged seat, and space heaters in the winter months. There is no trace anywhere of leafy, green plants or leather and chrome furniture. The lack of pretension is almost excessive.

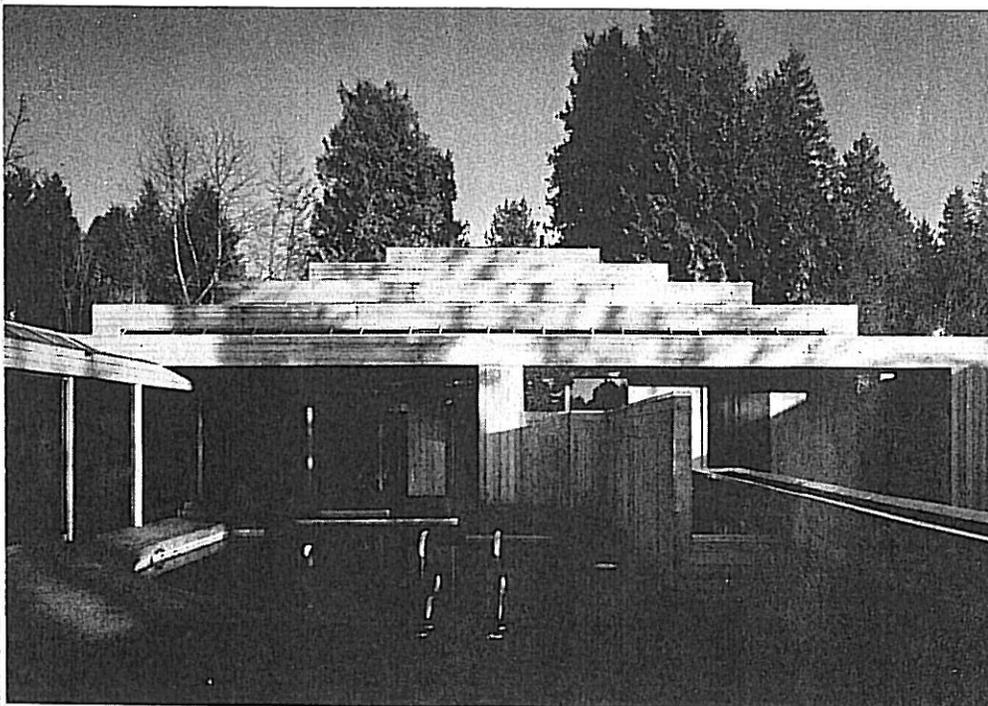
But the place suits Dan White. He works without fuss, like somebody who has got out of bed, stared at the ceiling for a while, put on his clothes and decided to

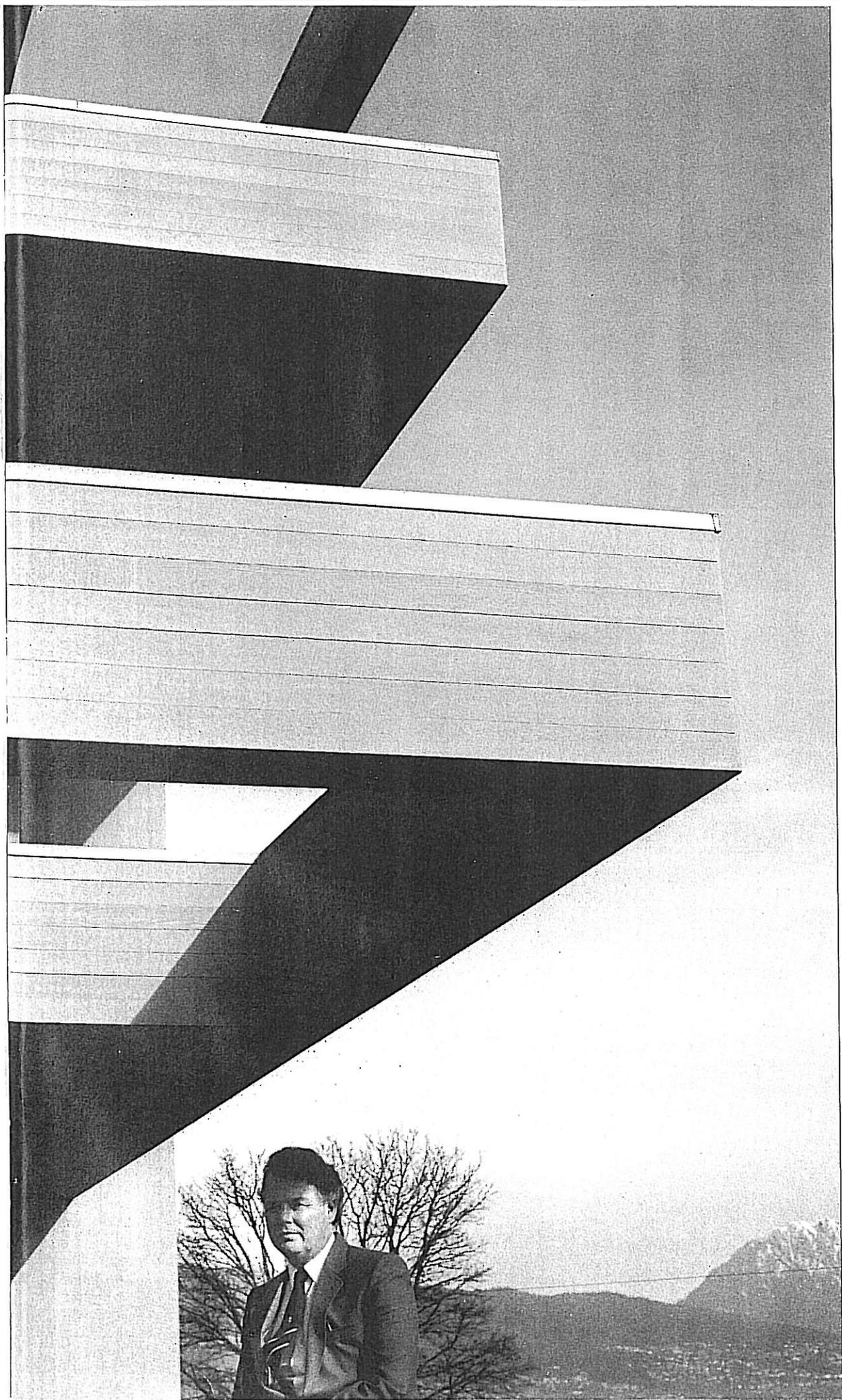
get the job done. A former assistant, architect Richard Bolus, recalls summer days when White would sit out on the lawn of the Alberni house with a beer, gaze at the arches of the nearby McDonald's, and think about a house he was working on. "And then he'd come up with these fantastic sketches," Bolus recalls. "As a young architect, I thought, 'I never realized life could be like this.'" The sketches, almost like doodles in their crudity and simplicity, were handed to Bolus and another architect in the office, Steve Zibin, to make sense of. The damned thing was, Bolus found he could make sense of them without much trouble at all. "The ideas in them were so clear and crisp, it was easy to refer back to the sketch in later, more detailed drawings."

It was as if White's brain, kicked into high gear, processed the data involved in a

design problem, saw clearly a variety of spatial relationships to solve that problem and came out with a design. An embryonic design but, in a way, complete. "The way design was taught to me," Bolus remarks, "it was something you did over a drawing board, and there was a lot of grinding work before it came together. If you defined the problem properly, a solution would come. Dan's approach was more, 'trust your feelings.' It was more of an intuitive, *a priori* approach." Bolus shakes his head at the memory of White spinning ideas in that chair on the Alberni Street lawn. "I thought, 'You make your *living* doing this?'"

To Bolus, it seemed that White was deliberately defying Thomas Edison's "one per cent inspiration, 99 per cent perspiration" formula for genius. ("Dan doesn't think he's a genius," Bolus adds. "He's just having fun.") But White isn't really defying Edison. He does end up, ultimately, sweating it. He maintains, for example, that he comes up with three or four basic designs for every one that is finally adopted. More to the point, the profession itself ensures that practitioners, no matter how inspired, do a lot of "grinding work" before they're finished with projects. Nowhere is this more true than in the architecture of private residences. The detail work per square metre in houses is far greater in scope and far less financially rewarding than in office buildings or shopping centres, which are the closest thing to a gravy train for architects. There is also the wrestling with building codes, zoning regulations and contractors, all forces which can torpedo cherished designs with amazing effectiveness. These forces operate in all fields of architecture, but it's harder to explain them to a couple with their hearts set on a house than to the board of directors of a company that wants a new office tower.





Dan White on the deck of his latest house, designed for a Hong Kong businessman named Ma. Opposite: The Weaver house (1977) illustrates White's preference for strong, geometric forms, which he fits together like a complicated, three-dimensional puzzle.

Of his relationship to his clients White says, "It's total involvement. Everything is intense." The clients want to express their feelings, their sense of themselves in their house, and they look to the architect for help in the way some people pay good money for the attentions of a psychotherapist. Ian Davidson, who thinks that White "handles all that as well as anyone I know," believes the client-architect relationship in residential work is brutally punishing to the architect, especially when the clients are people who have lots of money and are in the habit of getting

resilient individual than Ian," he comments. "I really like dealing with people who want different things, because it gives you an opportunity to express these things in architecture, and it adds an excitement and uniqueness to what you're doing." It is a rare architect, for example, who gets to design riding stables, as White has — they simply aren't normal features of the middle-class dream house.

As for dealing with such clients, Richard Bolus says, "I think he just charms the pants off them, myself." White, one suspects, has as fierce an ego as any other

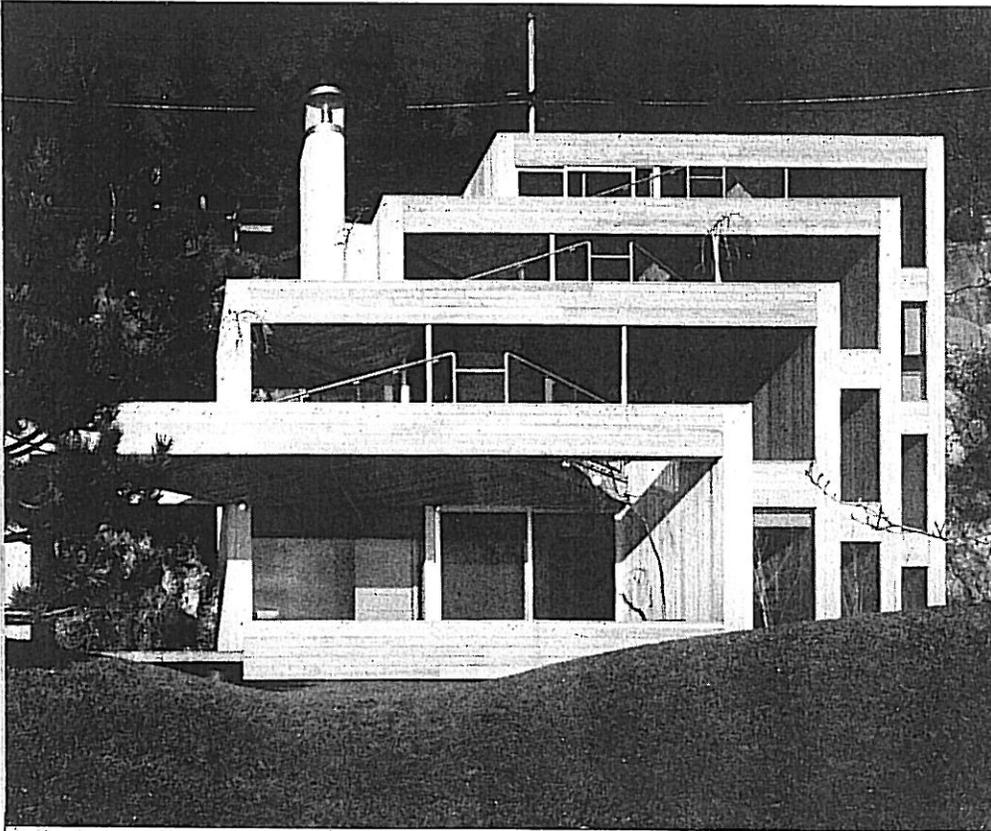
White's doggedness in forging his architectural career is the more remarkable because it was not his first choice. He didn't study architecture until he entered the University of B.C. at the age of 21. Before that, White, a Vancouver native, wanted to be a painter. He particularly admired the work of Lawren Harris. "I always thought his work was very simple and elegant," White comments. "I tried very hard to paint like that."

The expression of his artistic drive that most impressed contemporaries in high school, at any rate, was a customized 1941 Ford, "which I roared around in until I got serious about life," White recalls. Part of getting serious about life was leaving painting for an art in which one could conceivably make a living — architecture. In school, like most architecture students, he struggled through the technical courses dealing with strengths of materials, engineering principles, and so on. "I found the academic side of things very difficult," he says. "I wasn't really a student."

But he had the good fortune to study design under a teacher named Arthur Erickson, a man White credits with considerable influence on his subsequent work. Another mentor was Frank Lloyd Wright. "I couldn't imagine a more marvellous experience than to see his work and be a little bit like that," White comments. He absorbed Wright's belief in "organic architecture," the architecture, in Wright's phrase, of "the natural, easy attitude, the occult symmetry of grace and rhythm affirming the ease, grace and naturalness of natural life."

White also absorbed Wright's love of Japanese domestic architecture, based on the dictum that "The reality of the building does not consist of walls and roof but in the space to be lived in." In traditional Japanese houses, this dictum results in an emphasis on open space and flexible interiors, and a corresponding de-emphasis on walls — concepts which have remained strong notes in White's own work. During university, White designed a heavily Japanese-influenced prefab cottage for a company formed by seven UBC students. This company, dubbed Fiscus, "was going to make our fortunes," participant and Vancouver lawyer Jack Reynolds recalls. Though they did build a few cottages in the summers, the Fiscus enterprise did not, in fact, make a fortune for all concerned. (It does survive today as a construction company carried on by one of its founders.)

Fiscus may have been more important for White as a source of professional contacts later in his career. He designed houses for all four of the lawyers involved in it, for example. Such contacts were important to White because he had a short apprenticeship. After university he went



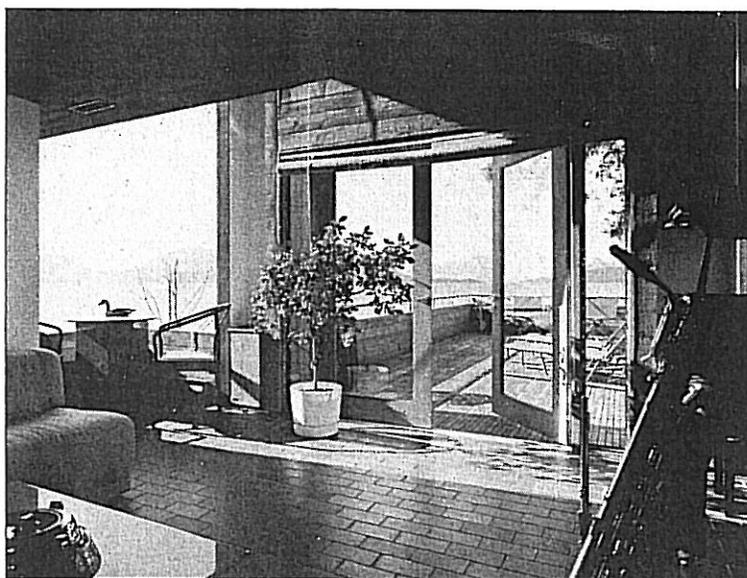
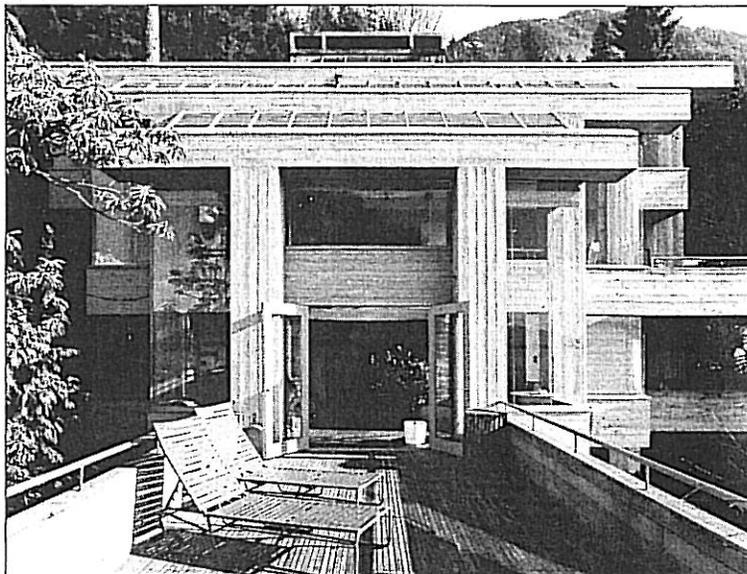
**T**he Mate House (1981) earned White an Architectural Institute of B.C. Award in 1982. His solution for this shallow site, bound on one side by the waters of Howe Sound and on the other by a 12-metre-high cliff, was to design a house composed of four staggered, rectangular arches. The entrance is at the top of the tallest rectangle.

their own way. "Many of them are demanding, rude, they have no understanding of the time it takes to solve problems and they want perfection," Davidson comments. "Dan's terribly overweight and he's tired and out of shape, and it's taken a big toll in his life. I'm amazed he's stuck it out so long."

White, who does have too much weight tucked above his belt, nonetheless denies that he has suffered terribly from the years of trying to please wealthy clients and accommodate their whims, like the desire of the hotel owner White worked for who wanted a complete bar service in his house, with piped-in Coke and soda water, and so on. "I'm perhaps a more

artist, but it is muffled by a very pleasant, modest temperament. It is easy to imagine the effect he has on clients: "We're superior people; there's no need to insist on the fact," is the subliminal, totally unspoken message radiating from him. It is a soothing message, and not insincere. He is a pretty low-key fellow. "I don't think in the eight years I was with him I saw him angry more than two or three times," Steve Zibin comments. That is a remarkable record for someone dealing constantly with civic bureaucrats, building contractors and wealthy clients. The only visible sign of the stress he endures is his recent resumption of cigarette smoking.





**T**he Reynolds House (1975), like all of White's houses, does not have broad, single-surface exterior walls. It also bears the architect's signature in other particulars: the application of light-stained cedar both inside and out, generous decks and the heavy use of glass and aluminum.

to work briefly for Geoff Massey, Arthur Erickson's partner, and then for Ian Davidson's firm for two years. He left Davidson in 1969, with Davidson's blessing. "I knew from the beginning that he was a very talented architect," Davidson recalls. For his part, White comments, "I desperately wanted to start my own practice." White is singularly unsuited to the role Zibin and Bolus played later in his own office, that of working out detailed drawings of other people's concepts. "Dan can sit down and do working drawings," Bolus allows, "but I've never actually seen him do any. He's no fan of the straight line."

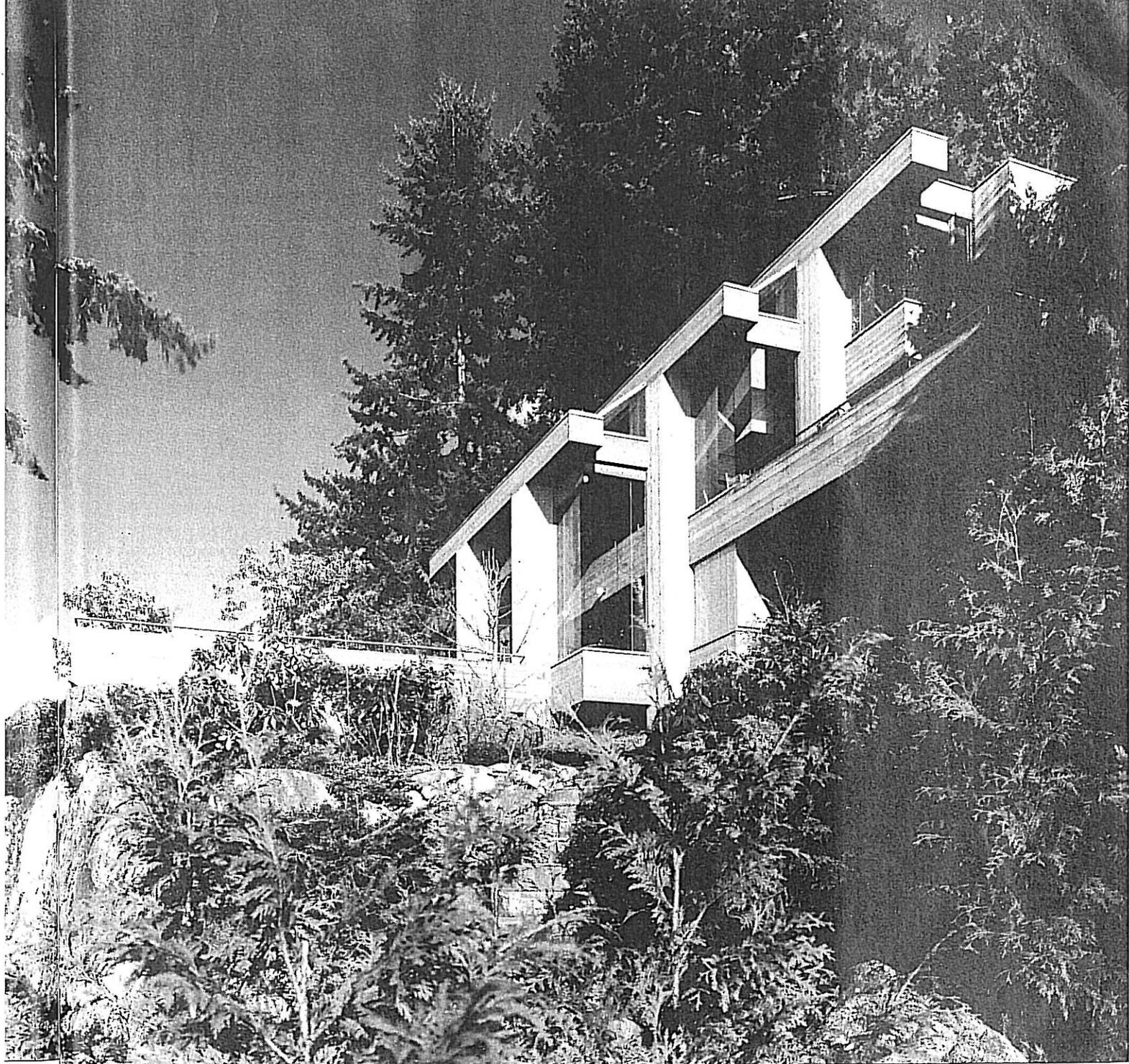
Davidson, who by then had rather wea-

ried of designing palaces for the rich, passed his residential practice on to Dan (which, at that time, amounted to one job), plus a certain influence on his work — the most significant local influence after Erickson. That influence largely consisted of steering White away from an overly Japanese approach to house design (Japanese architecture, while not exactly baroque, can be elaborate in its own refined way) and towards ever-greater simplicity. "It takes a long time to learn to do things simply," Davidson comments. "It's terribly easy to make complicated spaces. I used to tease Dan about it and try to get him to simplify things."

Initially, White did a lot of kitchens and



entry halls, as well as some commercial buildings such as a small bank and a small customs office. But work for houses began to come to him, and then work for ever-larger houses. One of those early houses was for ex-Fiscus member and Vancouver lawyer Julian Ray. Ray noticed a man sketching the house after it was built; some time later, a house of exactly the same design appeared on another West Vancouver property. Since this second house was on a flat site, and Ray's house had been carefully designed for a hillside site, the results were ludicrous. "Julian was furious. He wanted to sue anybody and everybody," White recalls. "I was rather flattered." It was an un-



sought, unwanted, but sincere tribute to White's originality, and an augury of future reputation.

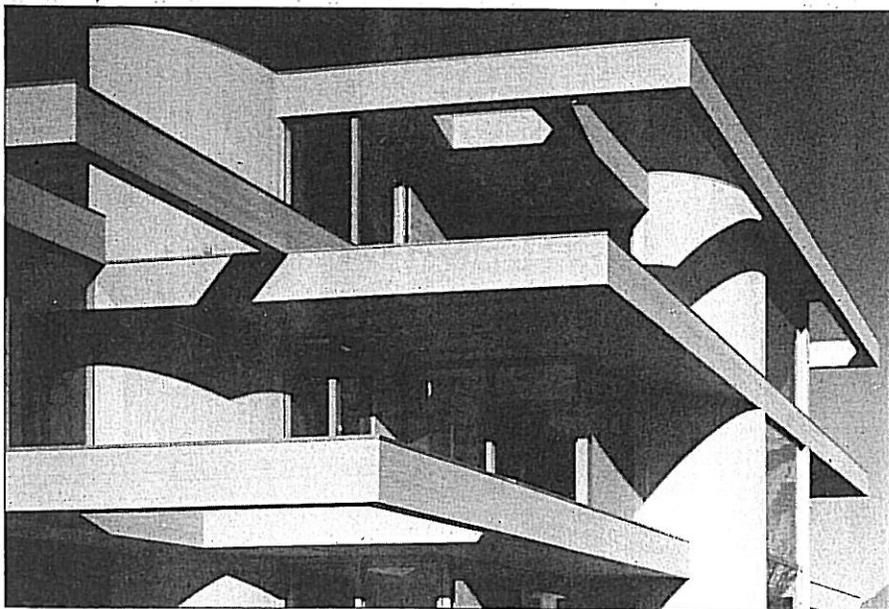
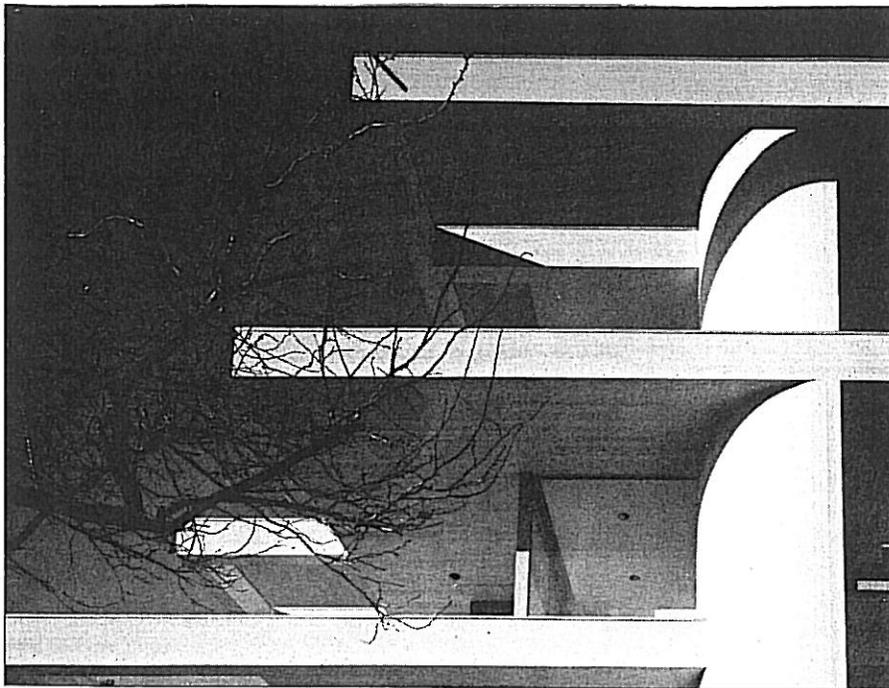
White's characteristic style in the design of these houses emerged from the start. Freed by the absence of the more rigid architectural traditions and conventions of eastern Canada, and stimulated by the availability of dramatic natural sites in and around Vancouver, White indulged his bent for bold and geometric designs, his taste for simple and strong forms. In this, of course, he was true to the spirit of the master, Frank Lloyd Wright, and to the spirit of modernistic architecture in general. He also set himself against current architectural trends,

the "terrible plague of post-modernism," in Davidson's words: "everybody doing ticky-tacky little things, historical references all over the place."

The post-modernists, reacting against the blandness of much of modern architecture, have been reintroducing the age-old architectural motifs (arches and colonnades, for example) banished by minimalists such as Mies van der Rohe, and the proponents of "organic" architecture. White has ignored this trend, this use of what he sees as "elaborate and fussy" design. "I happen to like the strong forms, the minimal use of things, the simplicity of design," he maintains, unrepentant. So strongly does he feel about

the matter that he refuses to have architectural magazines, with their post-modernistic blandishments, in his office. "Some Canadian architects are waffling right now, because they feel they're out of touch," Bolus reports. Not White: he remains committed to his own, now slightly unfashionable, ethic.

White's design bent can be clearly seen in one of the best of his earlier houses, built in 1975 for Jack Reynolds and his family — a house overlooking Howe Sound in West Vancouver. The exterior design is simple, an elaboration of basic post and beam construction. It is a bold articulation of that basic style, with the beams heavily "expressed," as architects



**T**he Ma house (presently under construction) rests on beach sand, shored up by a system of buttresses made of concrete poured into trenches dug out of the sand. When the house is finished, guests will enter by way of a stunning interior courtyard with a waterfall.

say. That is, the house, like all Dan White creations, never presents a broad, single-surface front wall; that front exterior is broken up into various forms, like horizontal beams, which can be clearly seen as both distinct and part of a whole. This kind of massing can make a house appear bigger than it is (the Reynolds's house looks much larger than its 167 square metres, chiefly because of the use of exterior decks) and also smaller. The Shepherds's residence in the Southlands, for example, contains 1,486 square metres, but it avoids a monumental look because of the separation of its structure into various overlapping wings.

A house must also be functional, of

course, and the central idea behind the Reynolds's house was, in Reynolds's words, that it have the feeling of a "farm house with a farm kitchen." The kitchen, as in farm houses, was to be the focal point of the interior, the place everybody tended to gravitate to. In this respect, White's design has been a success. "What he designed did not appear to be our concept at all," Reynolds comments, "but that's exactly what it's turned out to be. The family lives around the kitchen."

White achieved this effect by placing the kitchen in easy, open proximity to the living room, and particularly to the fireplace, just around the corner from the kitchen entrance. Moreover, the low

cedar ceiling gives that room the feeling of shelter, especially since it opens onto the more fluid space of the rest of the house and a panoramic view of Howe Sound, which is visible through a glass wall facing the water.

The house also bears White's signature in various particulars: the light-stained cedar of the exterior, done in a uniform color scheme, the use of decks, the use of circular stairways (easy to tuck into corners and tending to open up interior space — something White is almost obsessed with), the heavy use of glass and aluminum. (Yes, the Reynolds did have a problem with heat loss in the winter and with a greenhouse-effect in the summer. With White's assistance, the problem was alleviated by the installation of what are, in effect, invisible storm windows for the winter, and a hidden ventilation fan and nearly invisible solar film fitted to the underside of the skylights for the summer.)

"It took me a good seven, eight years to like living here," Pat Reynolds comments. "But I'm liking it more and more." Initially she was confounded by the fact that, as she puts it, "the house has so much *shape*. You can't take your furniture and possessions and make them the focus. It's got to be the *house*." For one thing, there are no walls inside the house to hang things on or to set furniture against. Furniture has to be chosen in groupings that manage somehow to look good as discrete, almost isolated units.

White, like most good architects, takes a keen interest in what his clients do with the insides of their homes. (If they have the additional money and the willingness, he is delighted to take the chore of interior design and decor off their hands.) Reynolds recalls the occasion when he and his wife put up drapes to warm the place a bit. "The next time Dan was around he saw the drapes and said, 'What is this?' And we said, 'What's what?' And he said, 'These curtains.' And we said, Well, they're curtains we put on the windows of *our* home that you designed for *us*.' And he said, 'If you had told me you wanted a home in which you were going to put curtains, I would have designed you a home for curtains.' We started thinking about them and looking at them and realized that he was entirely correct, and the curtains didn't fit at all. They lasted about six months, and we've never put up a curtain since."

One thing more might be noted about the Reynolds's house: it embodies White's belief that, in his words, "it's important to lock a building to the ground." No plunking down or perching the thing on the site. The most striking example of White's tendency to "lock a building to the ground" is the house he designed for Ferenc Mate, also overlook-

ing Howe Sound in West Vancouver. This house is an example, as well, of White's relish in devising solutions to urgent problems involving a site. The Mate house, set on a landfill that makes proper foundations impossible, fronts on the beach and is backed up against a cliff; according to White, there had been four previous, unsuccessful attempts to design a house for that site.

White's solution was to make the house a kind of vertical bridge from the beach to the top of the cliff, a bridge consisting of four staggered, rectangular arches, with the entrance at the top, almost level with the top of the cliff. The four arches are simple and bold in the extreme. (Sometimes White's boldness gets out of hand. The house White designed for a Dr. Weaver in Vancouver has a stark and powerful exterior, for example, with an inhuman quality, like something the Aztecs might have approved.)

Houses such as the ones designed for Mate and Weaver lead to the suspicion that White, in the words of Steve Zibin, "might sometimes over-impose his ideas on the clients. I felt that way, I must admit, when we were working together." Zibin adds, however, that "since then I have tempered my view because, in looking back, it doesn't seem the clients were ever unhappy." Reynolds supports Zibin's last comment. "At first you feel that you have received the architect's house rather than the house that you wanted," he says. "But you discover, as the years go by, that the house is more what you wanted than you yourself knew." (White himself admits that "I've had clients who certainly felt that I hadn't been successful. They're not many, but they're there.")

White's most recent house, for a Hong Kong businessman named Ma, is the most striking example of his ability to design buildings to meet stiff challenges imposed by the site. The site of the Ma house, on the Spanish Banks, was a hillside composed of beach sand. Ma wanted a house high enough to accommodate his space requirements on what is a relatively small and narrow lot — too high for local height requirements if the house were to be built on top of the hillside. But the builders could not simply dig into the hillside, since there was every likelihood, in that case, that the entire hill and the houses already on it would collapse.

White decided to install a six-metre-high wall *below* the surface of the sloping hill at the high end of the site. To do this, the contractor dug a trench six metres deep and 0.6 metres wide along the line of the site at that end (after first digging a test-trench elsewhere on the site, under the direction of a soils engineer). Into this trench was poured concrete and steel. Afterwards, other trenches were dug away from the wall, down the hillside, and

#### DAN WHITE

wooden props were inserted in them to support the wall. Finally the rest of the hillside was dug out and the Ma house built on the site — a house four storeys high (technically two and a half storeys with a basement) which literally supports the hill in behind it.

The house is shaped like a triangle, with its base six metres beneath the surface of the earth against the neighbor's house, and its apex, at what was once the bottom of the hillside, adjacent to the street, facing almost due east towards Kitsilano. Again, it is a simple, strong form, with horizontal, cantilevered beams breaking up the exterior, a lavish use of decks and skylights, and a stunning courtyard with a waterfall inside the triangle itself. To alleviate the problem of blocking the neighbor's view, White designed the triangle so that it is lowest at the base, which lies adjacent to the neighbor's house, and highest at the apex, farthest from it. (The neighbor, understandably, is still not happy with this structure between his house and an excellent view of Stanley Park and North Vancouver. He has made the accusation, often enough levelled against architects who make strong visual statements, that the Ma house is merely an architect's monument to himself.)

Ma's own view, meanwhile, is superb. The northern segment of the triangle commands Jericho Beach and the mountains of West and North Vancouver, and its eastern extremity, like the side of a vast movie screen upon which something epic is about to appear, commands the skyscrapers of downtown Vancouver. "Vancouver people wouldn't have considered that site because of the busyness of it in the summer," White remarks. "It takes an eye coming from afar to see what we've got here." (Especially when the eye is from Hong Kong, also a city of spectacular mountain and ocean views.)

White himself is partial to grand views, and possesses, in his home on Lone Rock Island in Indian Arm (off the Woodlands area of North Vancouver), what he considers "probably the most unique and beautiful site in the city." He bought the island with the profits from the sale of his Kerrisdale house during the great Vancouver real-estate boom of the early 'eighties, and now lives, with his wife — who also keeps the books for his architectural firm — and three children, two boys and a girl between the ages of 9 and 13, in the two houses previously built there. One house was built in 1918, the other in the 'fifties; an aerial view of these houses and the island is shown during each episode of CBC's "Danger Bay" series.

White maintains that his favorite form of relaxation is simply to retire to this

#### DAN WHITE

island home (his car is parked on the mainland and he crosses a foot-bridge to reach the island). There, he puts his feet up and watches the scenery — the waterfalls pouring down the mountainside, the sailboats in the Arm. A most pleasant existence. The only thing lacking is a house built according to his own designs — a house he will build, he says, when he gets the money. (White's income, he says, is in the "\$40,000 bracket" — an income bracket less than half that of a reasonably competent dentist.)

"Some people say, 'How do you stand it? How do you build these houses for other people and not live in one you build for yourself?'" White comments. "But you get such excitement, and your energy is so consumed by building these houses, that you have very little left for yourself. I'd have to stop all work in the office and spend six months designing my own house, the way we do for everybody else. And I couldn't afford to do that at my stage in life." Nonetheless, White adds, "My ultimate goal is to have my own house on that island, and to have an office attached to it, and be well enough known for clients to drive down the rough road to seek me out in that office."

This is hardly a fantastic wish for a man who has already designed many of the best houses in the city. Still, fame of the Erickson and Ron Thom scale has eluded him — in part, because White is bad at promoting himself. "In this office, we promote the hell out of ourselves," Richard Bolus (of Arcop Associates) comments. "Dan couldn't care less." For one thing, White does not talk a good building. His efforts at articulating the goals behind his design work are, at best, half-hearted. "I think we're pretty strong on a united concept, that there is a concept or theme that is worked through the building and that the idea comes and goes in major and minor themes and counterbalances and all these kinds of things," he will say, in an effort to get across the idea that a building should hang together and have more than just a few good ideas.

White's inability to promote himself on a grand scale means that he has yet to be given a large project — something on the order of the Law Courts or the University of B.C. Museum of Anthropology — which would impress his style upon a much wider public. It also means that he must continue to slug it out in a residential practice which he describes as "fragile" — that is, a practice with no guarantee that clients will be knocking on the door after the current project is finished. It is a remarkable position for a man who has already made a profound and lasting mark on the residential architecture of this city. □

## CONTRIBUTORS



Illustrator: Stuart Whitton. Writer: Paul McCann

### **KYLE JOHNSON** *Photographer*

Our piece on Canadian architect Dan White (page 198) is Seattle-based Johnson's most ambitious job for us and involved hiring a boat and travelling to remote islands. 'The Bowen Island house required driving on a winding dirt road for almost 40 minutes before even seeing a glimpse of the home,' he says. 'Shooting was tricky. There often isn't one angle on a Dan White home. They all give you glimpses from different angles, but never the full story in just one look.'

### **DEEPANJANA PAL** *Writer*

Indian writer Deepanjana Pal interviewed London artist Rana Begum (page 077) using Skype, chatting away until 3am Mumbai time assisted by countless espressos. 'I saw Rana's work for the first time a few years ago and the clean geometry of her pieces really appealed to me,' says Pal. 'The way she, and a number of artists of her generation, are interpreting the principles of Islamic art to create work that is distinctive, secular and contemporary is fascinating.'

Wallpaper\*

### **BLOMMERS/SCHUMM** *Photographers*

Dutch photographers Anuschka Blommers and Niels Schumm, who shoot for us regularly, are much regarded for their intriguing approach to photography. Whether it be snapping a model lying with her head on the kerb or picturing the shooting instructions they've had from a client, they like to play with formal conventions. For this issue, they photographed our Space story (page 182), a celebration of asceticism influenced by the current financial climate.

### **IDRIS KHAN** *Artist*

For this month's artist's recipe, Idris Khan contributed spaghetti arrabbiata (page 210). 'My wife Annie is obsessed with spaghetti and I can't eat anything without chilli,' he says. 'I think we eat it most nights. It's perfect for us.' Khan only graduated from his MA at the RCA in 2004, but his work has been shown in galleries all over the world. His digital layering makes the art pieces, photography, texts and sheet music he works with totally fresh and we are totally smitten.

### **SIMON NORFOLK** *Photographer*

Norfolk's work often focuses on the relationship between landscape and conflict, and he has won numerous awards for his shots of Afghanistan and refugee camps. For this issue, the British photographer made a study of the Bata shoe factory and surrounding community at East Tilbury (page 128), a Thames-side rendering of Bauhaus modernism. The factory closed in 2006 and awaits regeneration, but continues to be a striking presence in the Essex flatlands.

### **HADANI DITMARS** *Writer*

Vancouver-based writer Hadani Ditmars' first assignment for us was a feature on Iraqi architecture back in 2000, and she returned to post-invasion Baghdad in 2003 to research her highly acclaimed book, *Dancing in the No-Fly Zone*. While writing her feature on Canadian architect Dan White (page 198), she had an epiphany: 'West Coast modernism is our patrimony, our architectural heritage, and it needs to be acknowledged and protected.'

## Taylor house

This page and opposite, this Larson Bay waterfront residence, conceived as a long, narrow, bridge-like structure spanning a small ravine, features a wall of sloped glazing on the north side, through which the sea can be seen



# Natural wonder

Canadian architect Daniel Evan White has a gift for using the landscape to create pitch perfect homes

Photography Kyle Johnson Writer Hadani Ditmars



*Connell cabin*

This page and opposite, designed in the 1970s for friends of White's on Galiano Island, off the Vancouver coast, this cottage consists of three circles of vertically-oriented logs, punctuated by glass walls and studded with a Plexiglas roof



Vancouver-based architect Daniel Evan White was never a follower of style or trend. He marched to his own inner design drum, producing dozens of exquisitely executed houses, and a handful of public projects, largely confined to coastal British Columbia.

'In a way, Dan was a post-post-modernist,' says long time client Maureen Lunn, who has had two residences designed by White. While he hit his stride in the 1980s, just as fussy post-modern flourishes like arches and colonnades were gaining in popularity, White stuck resolutely to his modernist principles of clean, simple lines, bold geometry and Wright-inspired organic architecture. His uncompromising approach may have been considered unfashionable at the time, but he has since acquired a cult-like following among earnest young architecture students and a whole new generation of aesthetic purists.

Now 77 and retired, White spent his working life designing deceptively simple yet complex structures that defied conventional wisdom – and often gravity – frequently for seemingly impossible sites. Homes on remote islands, on steeply graded cliff sides, at the ocean's edge, residences that emerged out of ancient bedrock, surrounded by forest and soaring into the Canadian sky. They

celebrated and, indeed, amplified the beauty of their sites, but they were also noted for an intellectually rigorous aesthetic where precision and symmetry were counterbalanced by dramatic sculptural form.

There was nothing shy or retiring about White's design, or his daring engagement with wilderness sites. However, his colleague Russell Cammarasana recalls that his former mentor 'had absolutely no interest in self-promotion.' As a result, White's work is largely unrecorded. There are some images, but no project descriptions, save for a couple of articles in provincial magazines, and very little architectural criticism. Cammarasana and White's family share the archive of his hand-drawn sketches and plans. He never used computer-generated images, and for many years his office was an unassuming coach house with a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

Unlike his friend and one time architecture professor Arthur Erickson, White received almost no international commissions. Instead, he was content building off grid and out of the public eye. If Erickson had more in common with the flamboyance of his patron, former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, White was more the Glenn

Gould of Canadian architecture.

In many ways, he lived in his own world. 'Working in his office often felt like living in a bubble,' says Cammarasana.

'Dan had a kind of childlike innocence,' says Lunn. 'He was an artist, [in fact, White started out as a painter before entering architecture school in his early 20s] not a businessman.' Despite his love of beauty and luxury, and his many wealthy clients, he faced constant financial struggles, and sadly was never able to build a house for his own family.

But he was absolutely dedicated to his craft, and to his clients. 'Dan was the kind of architect people with impossible sites and unrealistic budgets would approach,' says Cammarasana. 'And he never let them down.' When bridge engineer Peter Taylor and his wife Gillian acquired a waterfront property in West Vancouver in the mid-1970s – a steeply graded, semi-wild forested site that dropped dramatically down to the ocean – they turned to White for a residential design that would work on the site.

'Dan marched around for a while in the thick bush,' recalls Peter Taylor. 'He eventually emerged on top of a rock above a 6m-high cliff face and expansively spread his arms, proclaiming, "the house must span across this gully, creek and all". Gillian and I contemplated this >>



## Lunn house

This page and opposite, one of two residences designed for Maureen Lunn. White was too ill to complete this masterpiece on Bowen Island, which features a dramatic bronze, hyperbolic paraboloid roof and wraparound cantilevered glass deck



brehtaking concept and then informed Dan that it was a crazy idea. However, Dan persevered. After a topographical survey of the lot, the architect prepared a relief model of the site and inserted a model of the house: it was a perfect fit.

Indeed, the resulting residence, built from concrete, glass and wood, fuses seamlessly with its site despite its generous 269 sq m. The two-storey edifice was conceived as a long, narrow bridge-like structure that spans a small ravine and is anchored to the granite rocks that embrace it. A stream flows beneath it, the run-off framed by the house as it cascades down to the ocean.

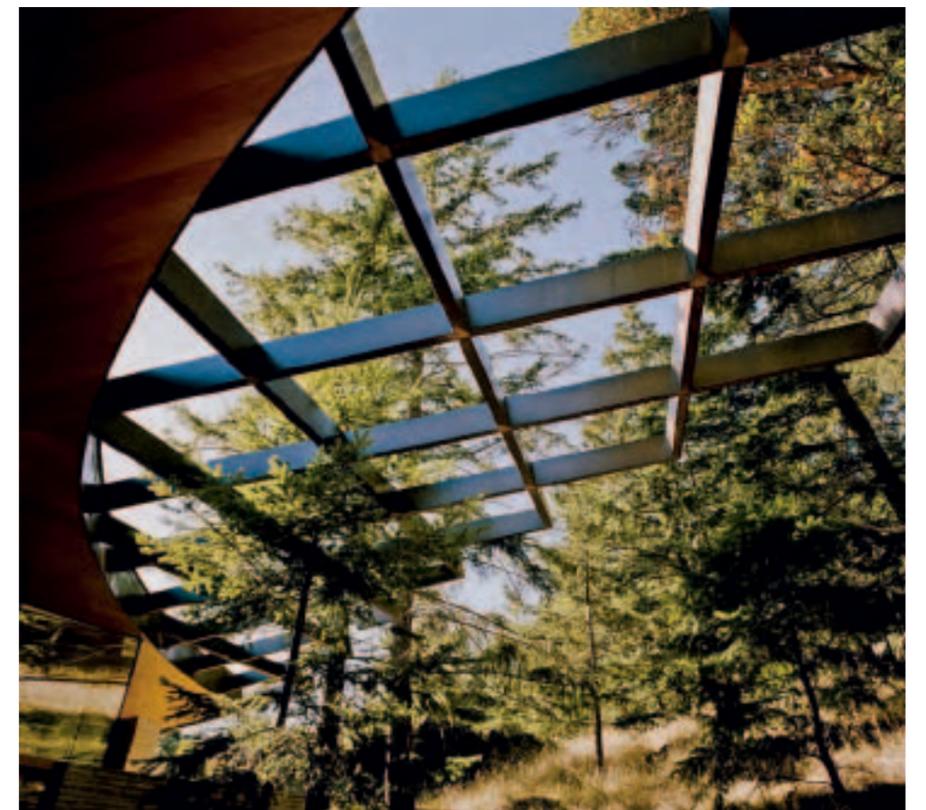
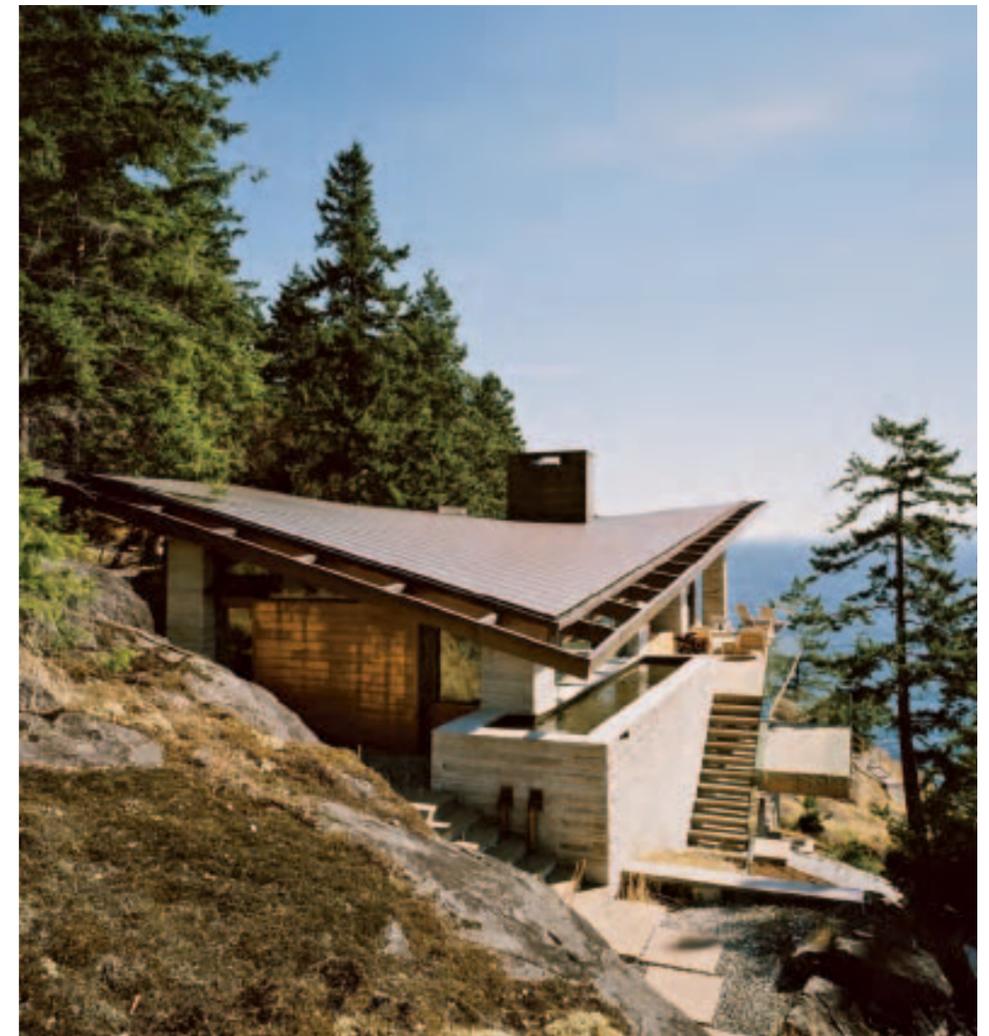
The journey to the Taylor house begins with a walk down a paved road – thick forest 30 years ago – at a steep, almost right-angled incline. Flanked by landscaping featuring a mix of native plants, both wild and tamed, the first glimpse of the house from the north side is magical: a wall of sloped glazing through which the sea can be seen via a second layer of south-facing windows.

The transparency of the approach is countered by an intimate, almost cave-like entrance area, an alcove that acts as a refuge from the open water. A large, solid hemlock door opens for the big reveal: a breathtaking view of a heart-pounding 12m drop to the seafront below.

While the north-facing entrance to the house draws one in, its south, sea-facing façade is the most monumental. Designed to appear as if it had been carved from the cliff, it features a long, steep, concrete and steel stairwell that seemingly floats in mid-air. The walk down (and much of the interior journey) is marked by framed views of the landscape, and at the end a pathway leads to the ravine that the house straddles, and a platform shaped like a mini amphitheatre opens up to the seafront.

While some essential principles of organic modernism imbued all of White's work, each of his houses is notable for its utterly unique form. When the McIlveens asked White to design a floating home for them in semi-rural Delta, just south of Vancouver, in the late 1980s, he created a child's toy of a house on a tiny 9m x 12m footprint. Using a variety of geometric shapes, the rigorous composition of cubes, cylinders and spheres is arranged around a series of interlocking L-shaped columns rising up the full three floors of the home and anchoring it in an essential tension between the orthogonal and the oblique.

By setting the McIlveen house at a 45-degree angle to the site, he ensured privacy from neighbouring homes and oriented the house west towards river and sea views, creating a heightened sense of spaciousness. With a simple palette of >>



## McIlveen house

This picture and below, this floating home in Delta, with watery views, was carved out of a tiny footprint and uses a simple palette of red cedar, glass and terracotta tiles to create a unique space that feels both solid and transparent



red cedar, glass and terracotta tiles, he created a unique space that plays with solidity and transparency throughout.

The first of two helix-like stairwells winds its way from a hooded, inward-looking first floor to the second floor that explodes into a light-saturated open living space. A curvilinear enclosed balcony offers a view of the water, while the kitchen curves out toward east-facing glazing. Above it looms a large cedar sphere, studded with recessed lights, that contains the third floor master bathroom and sauna. At night, the giant orb appears luminescent, and from a distance, the house looks rather like a Kashmiri pavilion set on the moon.

A walk up the second spiral staircase reveals a different aquatic view with each tread, while the semicircular balcony, framed by rectangular hoops, opens up to the coastal scenery. The cedar orb of the master bath hovers nearby, like a West Coast version of the orgasmatron from Woody Allen's *Sleeper*. On the other side



of the bath, the snug master bedroom reads like the lair of a vaguely psychedelic sea captain. This is a floating home that dares to domesticate the ephemeral.

To say that his approach to residential design was unique is perhaps an understatement. When White was asked by his friends Gavin and Lynne Connell to build a cottage on Galiano Island in the early 1970s, his response was to subvert the traditional cabin by designing a home formed from a series of vertically-oriented logs arranged in three circles. In a neat trick of Wright-inspired sacred geometry-meets-child's fort, the house is planned as a hexagon. The outer structure consists of three identical entranceways with floating cedar log stairwells, like ceremonial steps to a woody ziggurat. In between each are three decks framed by a circle of logs that extends all the way up to the roof. While the house appears like a log fortress from a distance, most of the outside walls are clear glazing, and light spills down from the Plexiglas studded roof.

The house is marked by a fusion of inside and outside, with specially angled glass corners that fool many visitors into confusing the two. Weight-bearing log columns with fitted slats are split in two by the glazing. At night, when the logs are lit, the distance between the two spaces disappears altogether.

Sadly, White was too ill to finish his ten-years-in-the-making masterpiece, the Lunn residence on Bowen Island, and it was left to Cammarasana to execute White's design. The handcrafted, custom-designed interior, that reads like couture architecture, is exquisite. But the exterior, set on a 111-acre semi-wild site, is pure sculpture.

Placed so as to maximise the stunning sea view and nestled into a natural depression in the rocky landscape, the house's defining feature is its bronze, hyperbolic paraboloid roof, which defines the dynamic interior spaces. From the road, the house is almost invisible, but it gradually opens up counter clockwise to reveal a three-storey edifice with wraparound decks of cantilevered glass that embrace the surrounding landscape. The interior is defined by a floating spiral staircase that descends into the library, contrasting with three glazing-heavy rooms that open up to the water views. Like many of White's residences, the house is a study in symmetrical precision and pitch perfect siting. His houses have an explicit relationship with their surroundings, their robust forms simultaneously modern and timeless. 'White was a man of few words,' says Lunn. Instead, his legacy is more than capable of speaking for itself. ✨  
Daniel Evan White Studio, Vancouver, tel: 1.604 738 7702, dew@telus.net