

Statement of Significance
Thorson House
2245 Ottawa Avenue
West Vancouver, BC
April 2008



Historic Place

The historic place is the Thorson House at 2245 Ottawa Avenue in West Vancouver. The house was designed by Architect Duncan S. McNab for the Thorson family and constructed in 1950. A secondary garage located on the site does not comprise part of the historic place.

Heritage Value

The Thorson House has architectural value as an important and early example of West Coast modernism and as a design by innovative architect Duncan S. McNab. It also has value for having been the home of the family of E. Thorson, who was an important structural engineer in the early modern movement in the Vancouver region.

Built in 1950, the house displays the features of West Coast modernism only a few years after the post-War emergence of the style. These characteristics include the clear expression of the post-and-beam construction, the extensive use of wood and local stone, and the broad window walls that capture the expansive view and relate the house to its natural surroundings.

Duncan McNab is an important member of the generation of Lower Mainland architects who changed the course of design in the years after World War II. He studied architecture at McGill University in Montreal in the late 1930s, at a time when Canadian architecture largely relied on the traditions of the Beaux-Arts. In 1938 McNab participated in a student revolt protesting the teaching of the “arts

and crafts” and other revisionist styles in favour of modernist theory and principles advanced by Europeans such as Le Corbusier. He started his own practice in 1952, after having moved West and joined Sharp and Thompson, Berwick Pratt, the large firm that took a leading role in the development of the new modernist architecture.

E. Thorson was significant as a partner in the structural engineering firm of Thorson & Thorson, which often worked with McNab. The best known work of the firm, which continues in practice in West Vancouver today, is the triodetic dome of the Bloedel Conservatory in Queen Elizabeth Park (1969; with Underwood, McKinley, Cameron, Wilson and Smith, architects).

Character-Defining Elements

The character-defining elements of the Thorson House include:

- The original exterior cladding of stained cedar
- The south-facing curtain wall of expansive windows, which frames a view south and west.
- The exposed post-and-beam structural system
- An integrated deck located off the living room and in front of the kitchen, covered by exposed structural beams
- The cantilevered roof and deck, which emphasise the south-facing view side of the house and act as shades (‘brises-soleil’) over the windows
- A curved floor plan that follows the brow of the hill and provides a panoramic view
- The hardwood floors in the living room and hall, which are laid in a curve following the plan of the house
- The stone fireplace with a cantilevered hearth, which is a dominant feature of the living space
- The row of high windows, which runs the length of the lower level and is a common feature used by McNab in his early residential designs
- The triangular lot, which includes a mature deciduous tree, a principal landscape feature of the site