

Modern Revival

For help in bringing an award-winning home back to life, the owners and their architect called upon the late architectural legend who designed it.

BY CAROLANN RULE

Tucked in alongside one of those bucolic lanes that make West Vancouver so appealing, on the kind of challenging coastal lot good architects love to build on, is a midsize modernist home with a storied past. It was designed on a shoestring in 1961 by the illustrious Ron Thom for John Grinnell, a founding partner in one of Vancouver's premier interior design firms, and won a coveted Massey Medal Award for architecture in 1964 for Thom's imaginative response



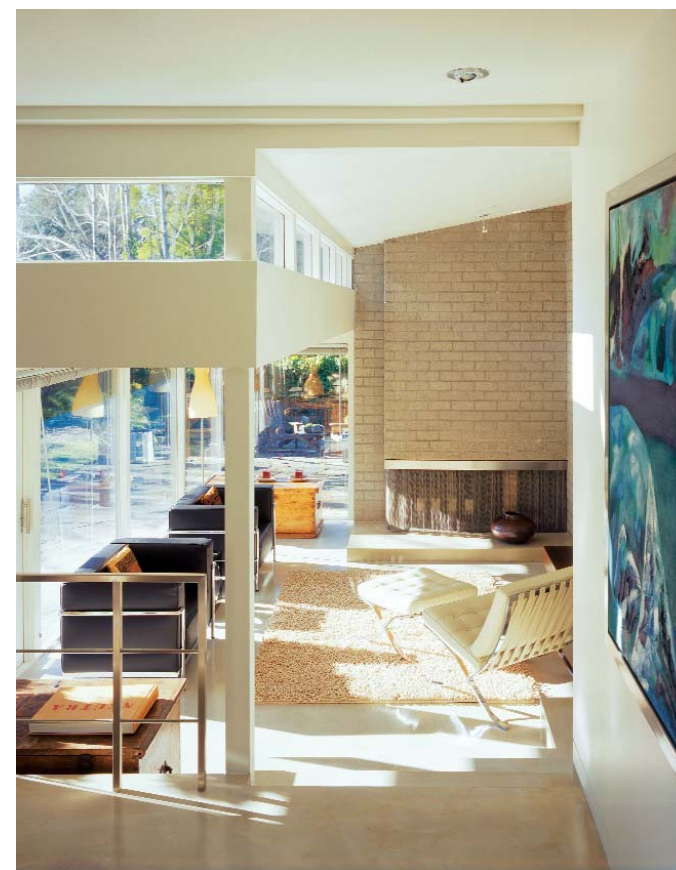
This page and opposite: Inside the home clean lines are softened by antiques and artifacts from Asia, the Middle East and northern Africa.



Photographs by Martin Tessler
Styling by Patricia Larsen



This page: Ron Thom was one of the first B.C. architects to link residential interiors to the out-of-doors. Opposite: But in bringing the home up-to-date, the owners found they had to remove walls to create a more open living environment.



to a site composed largely of granite outcrop. The structure, which was “saddled onto living rock,” to quote one journal write-up, was acknowledged to be a well-resolved example of ‘60s west coast vernacular architecture in the Richard Neutra vein. Neutra, a southern California architect whose internationalist style deeply influenced a generation of B.C. designers, was celebrated for his site-sensitive geometric constructions with wide expanses of glass that permitted indoor-outdoor boundaries to blur. Sharing similar attributes, Thom’s design proved a welcoming stage upon which the five Grinnells entertained influential local designers, neighbourhood friends and family.

Of course, all of that was back in the day.

In recent years the house had been subjected to thoughtless changes. “We could tell immediately this place was going to need a lot of work we couldn’t afford,” says veteran renovator Coreen Mays, who toured through it with partner Heike Brandstatter on their way to catch a plane for Hawaii in the spring of 2001. The couple, who are top Canadian casting directors with an Emmy, a Gemini and numerous other casting awards and blockbuster credits between them, had already spent two fruitless years scouring the North Shore for a classic modernist home to refurbish and were hours away from a holiday to mark an extended house-hunting break when they opened an e-mail from their real estate agent highlighting a property that roused their interest. The house was the vintage they wanted in a style they admired by an architect of note, says Mays; plus it came with a bonus: “the perfect location.



I grew up in this area, and my parents and sister live close by. When I was a teenager, I had always thought, if I could live anywhere in the world, it would be down in Tidley Cove. I said to Heike after we had a look around, 'We have to buy this house.'

Vowing to do right by Thom's 45-year-old concept, they hired family friend Daryl Plater to oversee and finesse the makeover. Plater, a clear-sighted architect who spent 10 years honing his modernist design skills working for Arthur Erickson and now divides his time between teaching design theory at Langara College and operating his own architectural practice, was pumped. "It's not often you get to modify the home of a highly regarded designer with clients who are totally engaged in the process." He saw the project as an opportunity for a true meeting of minds: his, the clients' and Thom's. Out of respect for the intent of the late architect, Plater says he, Mayrs and Brandstatter decided to "run some decisions by Ron, asking ourselves, 'What would he do in a particular instance

if he were renovating this house today?'"

What the trio knew for sure was that Thom would have corrected earlier renovation mistakes, such as the one that had left the sunroom addition with a stingy view of the garden. Of necessity he would have upgraded the building envelope but done so without compromising its perfect, period exterior; by choice he would have reworked the interior to pull it into the 21st century.

Modern though Thom's floor plan was, it did not feel open enough for the way we live today. The spaces on the main living level, which include the kitchen, dining and living zones as well as two other casual areas, were linked to one another by fractured views. Plater made the visual connection panoramic by removing full-height walls, replacing solid half walls with open-railed versions and raising ceiling heights where possible. A single unifying agent, exquisitely rendered concrete, replaced the five different floor treatments that helped disconnect these spaces. On the bedroom level, open-



This page: For more on the en suite bathroom and its cascading pattern of mosaic tile, refer to last month's *Western Living*, when it graced the cover. **Opposite:** Happy owners Heike Brandstatter and Coreen Mayrs.



In 1964 Massey Award jurors applauded the way the home was reconciled with a granite outcropping. Below: In a sheltered patio, lines blur between indoors and out.

ing up meant consolidating space. Where once there were five tiny bedrooms, now there are only three, with two sacrificed to create a larger central bathroom and more and better storage.

One of the things Mays and Brandstatter love about classic west coast modern houses is the way they open up to their surroundings. Even in its prerenovated state, the house communed with nature—it has two walls of windows off the living room that afford sweeping views of the garden and a novel deck off the master bedroom attached to a gargantuan rock—but the couple wanted to make the connection stronger. Among other modifications, Plater traded two walls for windows in the sunroom off the kitchen. Now it is possible to stand in the garden on one side of the house and look through it to the garden on the other. When you are inside, the “yard wraps around,” says Brandstatter. “There’s such great karma in this house.” **wl**



before: The interior as Mays and Brandstatter found it.

