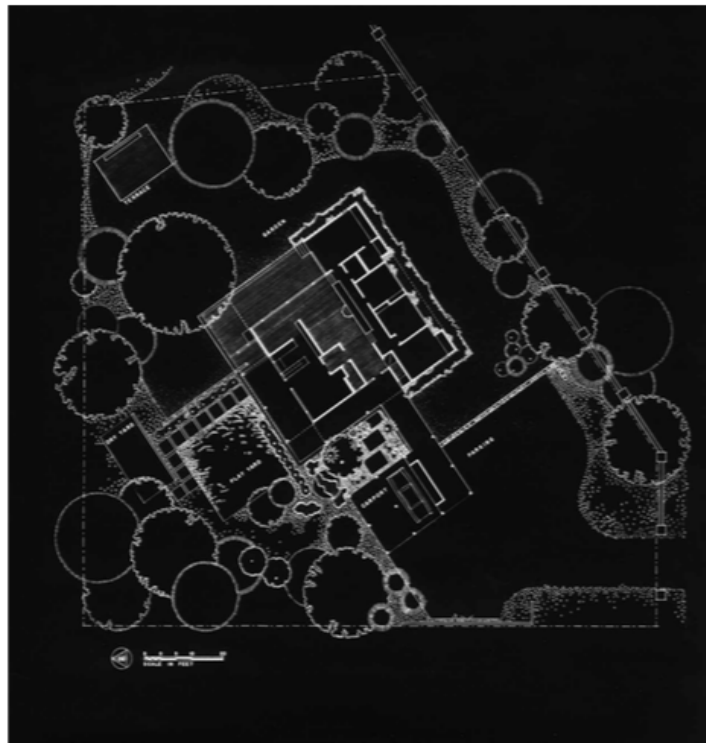


Spokane Modernism
 Ferris House, Spokane
 by Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe

Coastal modernism developed out of well-established economic and cultural networks running north from San Francisco to Seattle and western Canada. Particularly after 1945 these networks accompanied innovative design practice and educational initiatives in California and Cascadia. That mythic region – comprising Oregon and Washington States plus the province of British Columbia – was linked topographically, financially and socially. The interchange of people and ideas was exemplified by the much lauded visits Richard Neutra made to Vancouver and Banff, Alberta, and by those many Canadians who studied at Berkeley, Oregon or the University of Washington. The discourse of design was especially vibrant in California, with William Wurster and his partner Catherine Bauer enjoying national prominence during the 1950s; interestingly, Peter Oberlander, an émigré from Vienna who worked and taught in B.C., would write Bauer's biography, appropriately titled "Houser" (1999). The 1949 exhibition of recent Bay area architecture carried forward the nationally distributed publications of Elizabeth Mock and John McAndrew that focussed mainly on modernist domestic architecture in California. The work of Harwell Harris or Raphael Soriano in California, Paul Thiry, John Yeon and Pietro Belluschi in Oregon and Washington was greatly admired by their counterparts in the Canadian northwest, among them Ned Pratt, Fred Hollingsworth and Arthur Erickson. Either side of the 49th Parallel, architects shared an empathetic response to geography and climate while also valuing an aesthetic derived from function articulated through formal abstraction. Indeed, two significant figures in American abstract expressionism grew up in the Canadian West and were educated in Washington: Agnes Martin at Western Washington University in Bellingham and Clyfford Still at Washington State University in Spokane. To European modernist objectivity Pacific Coast architects brought, like those two great artists, a lyric sensibility inspired by the natural environment. It is in that spirit that the Ferris house takes its place.



Joel E. Ferris, II House - Original Floor Plan

Drawing up the deceptively simple plans and elevations in 1954, Walker realized the optimistic spirit of post-Second World War America and the transatlantic modern movement itself. He neatly blended functionalist aesthetic, new materials, contemporary art work and fittings to create a spacious and convenient setting for everyday family life, a setting that embraced natural landscape as well as artificial form in order to stimulate "greater contribution to society" and to "elevate" personal and communal sensibility.

Those ideas were written into a September 1958 article in the local Spokane press by Walker's architectural mentor, Royal McClure. His words disclose important themes in American design of the early Cold War era: ideas that deserve greater recognition in our re-assessment of the legacy of modernism in the Americas. Chief among them was a desire to seize upon innovative thinking and technology for the material and spiritual benefit of the individual and community, and the conviction that architecture and planning could build a better social fabric – one that married artistic and natural values with technical expertise so that standardized processes and materials could be given distinct, even personal significance through the exercise of high quality design.

TIME, MOTION AND EFFICIENCY

The Ferris house is a remarkable example of the application of that ethos, and of the growing appeal of modernist design in 1950s architectural culture and social economy. How so, when the house is relatively small and its location relatively obscure, Spokane being distant from the centers of state industry, finance and government? Because the modern movement developed alongside the increased compression of time and space largely consequent upon the two World Wars and Depression – typified by the emergence of mass electronic media and the jet engine. With respect to modernism, two of its most influential texts have titles that express concepts of spatial and temporal change, plus universal relevance: the French architect, Le Corbusier's "Vers un architecture" (1923) translated into English as "Towards a New Architecture" (1927), and the German, later American historian- theorist, Siegfried Giedion's "Space, Time and Architecture" (1941). Giedion's book was often re-printed and widely used in architectural and planning education, including in the architectural school at the University of Washington attended by Walker from that same year. Walker was even more directly exposed to European modernism when he enrolled at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, coming under the tutelage of Walter Gropius of Bauhaus fame.

West Coast Americans and Canadians had already integrated modernist design into their practice, in addition to the influence of immigrants like Neutra, or of his erstwhile patron, Frank Lloyd Wright. The rise of Nazi power had forced many talented artists and architects imbued with modernist thinking, notably Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, to relocate in North America. The Second War also accelerated radical technological and cultural change. For example, Walker served in the US Navy and was exposed to radical technical applications such as radar, but also to efficient compact spatial organization. The application of ergonomics to naval and military design represented just one of several interconnections between modernist precept and contemporary production. High technology, centralized organization and large-scale planning seemed essential to Allied victory in Europe and the Pacific. The war's legacy also included, albeit soon contested, the notion of internationalism. Among Walker's peers were young and creative designers from around the world, including German-born Cornelia Hahn and her soon-to-be husband, Peter Oberlander; like Walker they helped transform the North

American design idiom – respectively in landscape architecture and community planning.



Walker excelled at Harvard, winning the Appleton Traveling Scholarship and the Small House competition organized by the Architectural Forum. That professional journal had, and would continue to open up American awareness of European modernism which Walker's travels confirmed. He returned to Spokane and in 1953 opened an office with his life-long friend, John W. McGough. They shared a sense of mission: to mobilize design for improving everyday living. In the period before fame culture took hold, they were content to carry the new aesthetic of modernism into the rebuilding of local and regional environs. The heading of McClure's 1958 article on the Ferris house is instructive, reading "Needs are seen as Design Basis." Much as modernism's geography was wide-ranging, so Walker and McGough designed for a range of building types. Among their earlier work was the Ridpath Motor Inn (Spokane, 1953). It demonstrated modernism's alliance with the automobile both as icon of effective design and of the potential of techno-industrial production to bring good housing no less than personal mobility within the reach of most citizens.

Le Corbusier and Neutra liked to highlight the quality of their new architecture by including late model automobiles in publicity photographs; and Wright cherished his late 1940s red Lincoln. Interestingly, with his prize money, Walker in 1952 purchased a Raymond Loewy-designed Studebaker Champion convertible. Anticipating the road trip of popular culture, he drove from the East to the West Coast, before the Interstate system (and later, the Trans-Canada Highway) reconfigured North American social geography as much as radio and television. A photograph has survived of Walker's Studebaker parked in the carport of the Ferris house. Such photography of automobile and new house pepper the pages of professional and popular media. Especially in the photographs American, Julius Schulman or Canadian Selwyn Pullan, shot of houses along the West Coast.

In many such photographs the automobile figures as family companion, reflecting its utility for North American modernism's greatest legacy – a huge new wave of suburbanization.

The Ferris house located at 431 East 16th Avenue is less typical in being built within the central district of Spokane, near Manito Park, the Episcopal Cathedral and Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center. Still, in a May 1960 article on the Ferris family and home in the Spokesman Review, the youngest of their four children, Toby, is shown sitting in a pedal-car watching Mary Jean and his three siblings gardening. A year later the house was covered at greater length in the widely circulated Sunset Magazine. More populist than Arts & Architecture, it compared with Vancouver B.C published Western Homes & Living, as organ of modern architecture and consumer design attuned with the blue-to-white collar society of the new peripheral housing subdivisions.



Those sub-divisions seldom matched the inventive standards of California's "Case Study" houses or the plainer Canadian "Trend" Houses, but created habitable neighbourhoods — not always the melancholy "Little Boxes" of the popular song. The new communities were usually constructed with schools and churches but also shopping precincts. Indeed, Washington State had already set a continental precedent with Norgate. This new neighbourhood was designed by Victor Gruen to accommodate the tremendous growth in the workforce required by the Boeing Aircraft Company. Gruen revised early European modernist stress on community facilities as the core of city and neighbourhood planning in favour of retail. This arrangement fitted well with the rise in automobile ownership, and appeal of auto-aesthetic in North American culture prior to Ralph Nader and the compounding of traffic congestion and pollution. But the legacy of auto-modernism could also destroy architectural and urban patrimony as exemplified by the rending apart of downtown Seattle for expressways.

MARRYING ART TO FUNCTION

The Ferris house, as noted, stands far apart from that outgrowth of North American modernism. Instead it embodies other more creative alliances stimulated by the movement. Walker's obvious attention to family needs, introduction of art work and melding of economy with delight reveals the more benign force within the modern movement. On a smaller scale both Walker and the Ferris' valued the visual arts akin to Philip Johnson — who would collaborate with Mies van der Rohe on arguably the most celebrated modernist building: the Seagram Building in New York, a steel and glass temple of commerce commissioned by the Canadian Bronfman dynasty.

There is an echo in the Ferris house of the even more severe modernist geometry of Johnson's renowned 1949 house at New Canaan, Connecticut. The sense of optimistic social purpose running through the post-1945 decades undergirded policy in both the States and Canada that augmented lending and funding for housing with a massive expansion of cultural and educational institutions.

Walker would design the Spokane Opera House in 1974, while Mary Jean Ferris served as president of the Junior League and of the Women's Association of the Spokane Philharmonic Society. A prominent feature in the entryway of the Ferris house is a handsome bronze and metal sculpture designed and made by Spokane artist Harold Balazs. Screening the entrance door and partly also the sleeping from the living areas of the house, the sculpture's qualities of disciplined yet dynamic abstract composition contributed to the award accorded to Walker for the Ferris house by the Inland Empire Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1960. A contemporaneous article in the Spokane newspaper announcing a talk by Joel Ferris about their home was captioned "Ferris: Talk to Tell of Home Art."

Another significant alliance within North American modernism relates to the retail furnishing business that helped Joel and Mary Jean Ferris commission Walker and finance construction of their house. This was the mutually beneficial alliance between progressive design and commerce in household furnishings and supplies — the average post-Second War North American home, to misquote Le Corbusier's famous sentence, became a place to run machines in! More specifically, the commerce in, or rather consumption of, furniture, fittings and decorative objects purveyed by the Ferris's business: JOEL Inc. Joel Ferris garnered fine design for the enlightened citizens of Spokane to purchase: from chairs and tables, to fixtures and ornaments from European, Scandinavian and American designers and craftspeople, among them Ray and Charles Eames. JOEL Inc. mirrored larger retail companies in the States and Canada in seizing the profitability of good and affordable new style design. JOEL Inc. prospered, eventually occupying a group of renovated 1890s brick warehouses on South Post Street. The store only closed in 2005, three years after the death of its founder and shortly after the passing of Bruce Walker.



ORGANIZATION and AESTHETIC: STRUCTURE, PLAN and SPACE

The spirit of innovation, informality and inspiration distinguishes the Ferris house. The low-rise glue-laminated post-and-beam structure is exposed externally and internally in a modernist fashion. It is relieved by red brick and white stucco walls that provide weather protection and shield more private interior spaces. The glulam posts nicely modulate the embracing grove of old-growth trees. And Walker's disposition of those posts – around the carport simulating Le Corbusier's famous slim pilotis – sets a theme of volumetric geometry. In turn, that theme is varied through an equally adept arrangement of the wall planes and horizontal capping eave. The several precincts of activity, from parking to living or sleeping, are delineated with delicate clarity. Moreover, the positioning of harmonious architectural elements introduces a surreptitious order of articulation, and visual interest. On the one hand the house seems to advance toward the visitor, and on the other to move out toward the garden. This sense of movement – a kind of unobtrusive yet determined re-working of Picturesque conventions – is most apparent in the trellis screen bridging house and tree-scape, replete with panels painted Mondrian-style in primary colours. The gentle march of exposed posts around the house perimeter is augmented by the changing textural qualities of glazing and brick or stucco enclosure.

This fabric encloses under 2,000 square feet of living and sleeping space yet inside appears remarkably spacious. The ceilings are ten feet high in the living precinct and only slightly lower in the bedrooms. Their space-expanding effect is increased by extensive fenestration, both fixed vertical windows and horizontal sliding glazed panels. The opening into each other of the nonetheless discrete precincts for the functions of everyday living is alike reinforced by diversity in materials and surfaces. The red tile floor in the main living space contrasts with the successively more diffused wood panelling and painted plaster walls and ceiling. And throughout the simplicity in form and finishes suffuses light inward from the fixed and sliding glass windows, framing and enticing appreciation of nature.

This configuration was part of Walker's satisfaction of what McClure had described as "Needs" – the provision of material and psychological environs for family life. The house comprises two rectangles placed alongside the central axis leading straight from the entrance to the window wall of the living area overlooking the garden. The footprint of the living area is broader than that of the contiguous sleeping accommodation, which extends a little beyond its perimeter at either end. It is elevated by two steps, and built over an excavated basement. Entered from a steeper staircase beside the entrance, the basement was reserved for the furnace, freezer and storage, plus art display and book shelves. The bedroom accommodation is further separated from the open-plan living area by a three-quarter height wood divider. This is sufficiently wide to house display and book shelving plus storage. A second flat panelled wood divider on the main living area side also boasts a central stove fireplace. From the ergonomically functional galley kitchen, in which even the finish of the appliances is married with the restrained decorative composition of functional components, Mary Jean could observe her children at play or tasks inside and outside. Yet when entertaining or seeking quiet, the utilitarian facilities did not obtrude. Likewise the bedrooms have built-in cupboards and ready access to compact bathrooms. In the same vein, Walker conceived the structural system to allow easy expansion. This happened three times; the largest in 1963 upon the birth of the Ferris's fifth adding a new master bedroom with attached balcony, and the last in 1983 pushing the dining area to the eave line and thereby realigning the living accommodation from north-south to east-west.

STRUCTURE A NEW RELATION TO NATURE

Such neat and efficient marriage of plan and structure was the hallmark of what might be termed Coast Modernism. Variegated in terms of composition and effect, this patrimony embraces houses by a tally of remarkably talented architects beyond those already named. Their work, in company with Walker's Ferris house, explodes one persistent misconception about modernism, namely that modernism rejected nature and humanist sensibility. The truth is quite the contrary, especially with respect to natural topography – including its climatic conditions — and the botanical realm. In fact, considerations of site, and of social attitude, played a major part in the evolution of the Ferris house. Initially the Ferris' engaged McClure and selected a plot in the Comstock Park Neighbourhood. But its citizenry rejected McClure's designs as too radical. Fortunately,

Joel's uncle owned part of a turn-of-the-century estate that included a walled clay tennis court which he offered to them as an alternative site. Then Mary Jean decided against McClure's next scheme. This envisaged a house raised on stilts but which would thus overlook neighbour's property. So Walker stepped in with his beautifully modulated design – satisfying family requirements while honoring the truly lovely setting amongst fine trees. Moreover, architect and client had the advantage of the temporary presence in Spokane of the rising young American landscape architect, Lawrence Halprin.

Already well-established in California, Halprin build a transcontinental practice, later to layout the Sea Ranch condominiums and Levi Plaza in San Francisco. He shared the minimalist yet empathetic approach to landscaping advocated by another Northwest Coast designer, Christopher Tunnard, who had won international recognition with his book Gardens in the "Modern Landscape" (1938). Halprin realized his holistic vision of design and landscaping by reinforcing existing planting. Thereby he contributed to the effortless reach of house and trellising into the natural setting, further visually orchestrated by a tiled seating platform in permanent converse with house and garden. The lap of botanical realm around precisely regulated architecture – punctuated by a Japanese-influenced courtyard – celebrated his idea that modernism could embody the vital archetypal needs of individual and group. The sophisticatedly simple architecture Bruce Walker created for Joel and Mary Jean Ferris in 1954 survives as an inspiring, pleasurable and remarkably convenient living environment. Its very economy of means yields an ambience of subtle repose always animated by the diurnal play of light and vista on Halprin's superb garden.



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