

# BINNING HOUSE CONSERVATION PLAN

## 2.0 HERITAGE VALUE

### 2.1 PARKS CANADA STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: BINNING RESIDENCE

#### Description of Historic Place

Binning Residence National Historic Site of Canada is located on a small, steeply sloped site on a well-treed and quiet residential street in West Vancouver, British Columbia, with a view of Burrard Inlet. A small two-bedroom house, it consists of two rectangular volumes that are stepped down to take advantage of the natural topography of the site. With its low massing and flat roof and situation within mature vegetation, the residence virtually disappears into the landscape. The official recognition refers to the house and its lot at the time of designation.

#### Heritage Value

Binning Residence was designated a national historic site of Canada in 1997 because:

- it is an early and remarkably intact illustration of architecture in the Modern Era;
- it is clearly associated with the changing social, economic, and political conditions of the day;
- it demonstrates meaningful interrelationships between form and function, and architecture and art;
- its design has had a lasting and important impact on the work of artists, architects, and other Canadians across the country.

The Binning Residence constitutes a very early illustration of the Modern movement in residential architecture in Canada. Intended to provide a model for residential design, it combines a Modern approach to form and function with an economy and efficiency of construction by using local materials and up-to-date building technologies. Features such as its post-and-beam construction, simple rectangular volumes with flat roofs and deep overhangs, large windows and open interior plan, set a pattern of design that would influence post-war residential architecture throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Designed and constructed during the war when construction materials and labour were difficult to secure for private homes, the Binning Residence utilized traditional and local materials to produce a house type that could be mass produced and was affordable for the average family. The design is also noted for the careful integration of architecture and landscape. The building's stepped plan follows the slope of the land and the use of large windows, wide terraces and overhanging trellises have the effect of extending the architecture out into the landscape and breaking down the barriers between interior and exterior space.

Bertram Charles Binning (1909-1976), an artist and a leading promoter of Modernist ideology, deemed architecture to be the harmonious expression of science and society. He designed the house in collaboration with consulting architects C.E. Pratt and R.A.D. Berwick, to express the union of abstract art and new architectural forms. To that end, he included a gallery in the house to accommodate a changing selection of his paintings, ensuring that his domestic environment evolved with his art. Believing that the aesthetic criteria of harmony, integrity, order and balance applied to art and architecture alike, Binning worked as an artist and a teacher, promoting good architectural design in contemporary urban life.

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Although the landscape has evolved, the original artwork has been replaced by later Binning pieces, and minor modifications and repairs to the house have occurred, the original design intent has not been compromised.

## Character-Defining Elements

Key elements that contribute to the heritage character of the Binning Residence include:

- its location on quiet residential street in West Vancouver, British Columbia;
- its setting on a steeply sloped site;
- its orientation to views across the Burrard Inlet to the University of British Columbia's endowment lands, as well as to views from the house to the mature garden and a series of garden terraces adjacent to the studio and master bedroom;
- its rectangular form, small scale and low massing;
- the flat roof with deep overhangs;
- the post-and-beam construction on a reinforced concrete foundation;
- the open plan concept with efficient space planning;
- the use of hard and soft wood millwork and floors, and cedar v-joint vertical board cladding on both the interior and exterior walls;
- the original fenestration pattern with south facing clerestory windows, continuous floor to ceiling doors, tinted glass in the studio, tinted rolled ribbed glass set in the upper portion of the partition between the living-dining area and the long gallery-entrance hallway;
- the upper terrace extending from the living room square and terraces on the south, east, and north sides;
- the overhanging wooden shade screen;
- the Binning mural on the exterior wall that defines the principle entrance;
- the cantilevered canopy over the front door;
- the generously proportioned living-dining area dominated by a Cypress Creek fieldstone fireplace wall;
- the kitchen with U-shaped layout of custom-made fir plywood cabinets fitted with standard chrome handles and modern appliances;
- the period furniture, fixtures and art collection;
- the landscape elements including a Japanese maple, mature rhododendrons and a grapevine planted by the Binnings, nurtured within a terraced, well vegetated site that takes advantage of its southern exposure slope.

## 2.2 DISTRICT OF WEST VANCOUVER STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: B.C. BINNING HOUSE

### Description of Historic Place

The historic place is the B.C. Binning House, the studio house and property at 2968 Mathers Crescent in West Vancouver that was designed by the artist and teacher Bertram Charles Binning for himself and his wife Jessie in 1941. Later changes include an addition to the house, and a detached garage with workshop below.

### Heritage Value

The B.C. Binning House is significant because of its pioneering role as a demonstration site for principles of Modernism in architecture, and its contribution to the development of the West Coast

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Style. It is associated with B.C. Binning, who was an artist, cultural leader and founding director of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia. Binning is recognized as a pivotal figure in the Modern movement in British Columbia.

Binning designed his modest bungalow with the help of local architects C.E. Pratt and R.A.D Berwick in the spirit of the Modern International Style, which he was exposed to while studying in America and abroad. Key design concepts include: an economy of structure, the functional composition of internal and external volumes, an open flexible plan, and the interrelation of internal and external space. The design of this house represents a clear break from the traditional housing typology of the region, and inspired what has come to be known as the West Coast Style.

The house introduced a new relationship between architecture and nature, addressing the view of the surrounding land and seascape rather than the street. Sited half way down the sloping narrow lot, the flat roofline is barely visible from Mathers Crescent, while the house opens up to the view to the south. Binning advocated for the use of local materials that were affordable and readily available, and relied on their integrity to provide a simple design aesthetic. Binning's materiality and his use of built-in furniture and wall murals to compose space reflect the collaboration between art and architecture that would inform his later work on Vancouver's Dal Grauer Substation (1953) and the B.C. Electric Building (1956).

The Binnings used their home as a salon and showcase for Modernism, hosting soirees for progressive local architects and artists, among them Arthur Erickson and Ron Thom, who would be inspired to use architecture to heighten a sense of regional identity. Considered Canada's first truly modern residence, the integrity of the house and its contents continues to be valued for its contribution to education, innovation and discourse.

Affectionately referred to as "The House", it has garnered social value as an icon in Canadian History, and a pilgrimage site for both heritage and design communities. Now owned by the Land Conservancy of British Columbia (TLC), the heritage value of the Binning House is recognized by their commitment to its long-term conservation.

## Character-Defining Elements

- Features of West Coast Modernism including: post and beam construction, extensive glazing, use of affordable local materials, connection between interior and exterior spaces
- Siting of the house back from the road, midway down the sloping narrow lot
- Landscape character and terraced pathway from Mathers Crescent
- Open concept floor plan and use of oblique and acute angles to direct circulation and frame views
- Clear division of space between living, entertaining, and studio areas
- Exterior and interior painted wall murals
- Cedar cladding with v-joints used both in the interior and on the exterior
- Fireplace faced with large, rounded local stones
- Douglas fir plywood cabinetry and built-in furniture
- Clerestory windows of corrugated polycarbonate glass
- South-facing large glass doors opening directly to the outdoor patio and lawn
- Framed view through the trees across Burrard Inlet to the UBC campus