

**Statement of Significance**  
**Boyd House**  
**985 Duchess Avenue**  
**West Vancouver, BC**

**June 7, 2012**



**BOYD HOUSE** (*viewed from south*)

**Description of the historic place**

The Boyd house is a single-storey bungalow of wood-frame and cinder block, tucked by architect Ron Thom into a natural, treed slope that faces south on lower Sentinel Hill. This has been a very stable neighbourhood, with many neighbours living there for 30, 40 or more years.

The original building was designed in 1954 for Joan and Bruce Boyd, fellow art school students of Thom. In 1977, the third and present owner (for 40 years) added a small extension and skylights. A happy bonus: the house immediately to the west—991 Duchess Avenue—is another Ron Thom design, published as the Moulton House in Doug Shadbolt's book *Ron Thom: the Shaping of an Architect*. The present (second) owner grew up in yet another Ron Thom house, and considers himself a 'custodian' as long as he lives there. For now, the Moulton house is safe.

## **Heritage value**

The Boyd house is valued as an excellent example of the West Coast style modern residential architecture that excited architects along the Pacific coast in the 1950s, from California's Richard Neutra to British Columbia's trinity of Ron Thom, Fred Hollingsworth and Arthur Erickson. West Coast style literally put West Vancouver on the international architectural map when dozens of these homes were built here in the 50s and 60s. West Van's challenging natural settings were suddenly an inspiration for young architects eager to push the boundaries. Many of these homes are now lost to bulldozers.

Boyd house is a small architectural gem that seems to belong on its rugged site, growing out of the steep ivy and fern-covered slope but barely visible from Duchess Avenue. Thom liked to set his buildings so that people could come across a house in the trees—from above or below—but not be able to see all of it. A low-hipped cedar shake roof floats over the cedar and cement block base. Glass meets glass and corner windows vanish into thin air. The house reflects Ron Thom's admiration for the designs of both Frank Lloyd Wright, who often applied Japan's formal discipline to indigenous materials, and Richard Neutra, who believed deeply in getting to know his clients, their lives, their preferences. Design ideas that Thom then adapted to our Pacific Northwest climate and geography.

Boyd house is a classic example of the early "midnight specials" that young Thom and his fellow moonlighting apprentice Fred Hollingsworth, designed to supplement their income at Thompson Berwick Pratt. To keep costs down for the Boyds—close friends as well as classmates—Thom focused on cheap building materials of the day: cinder block, tongue-and-groove cedar, glass, and ox-blood coloured concrete slab floors. It's what Thom did with those materials in his early days that make this modest house of some 1,600 square feet, valuable 40 years later.

Architect Paul Merrick remembers the Boyd house as "almost singularly the reason" that Merrick became an architect, eventually working with his mentor Ron Thom. Back in 1954, as a boy living over the hill, Merrick and his father used to come by the construction site at 985 Duchess and watch "this wonderful space going up."



*View from south (Duchess Avenue)*



*View from north (rear lane)*



*South-Facing Patio Doors to Living Room*



*Rear Wing*



*Interior View*



*Interior View*

Although five Ron Thom-designed houses were nominated to West Vancouver's first Community Heritage Register (CHR) in 2008, no Ron Thom houses have yet been officially accepted to the present CHR list.

### **The architect of Boyd house**

Ron Thom was inspired by three remarkable teachers when he returned to the Vancouver School of Art after WWII: Bert Binning (whose West Vancouver home is a designated National Historic Site and Municipal Heritage Site), Fred Amess and Jack Shadbolt. Binning was the most influential because of his personal interest in the integration of art and architecture. Those were heady days. The concentrated mix of talented students—including West Vancouver's Gordon Smith—and staff created one of B.C.'s richest artistic periods.

While Ron Thom is best known in the West as a major influence in the development of the West Coast style of residential architecture (as well as designer of Vancouver's BC Hydro building on Burrard at Nelson), Thom is better known in Eastern Canada as the master designer of Massey College, Trent University, Shaw Festival Theatre and the Toronto Zoo. Thom died at his desk in 1986.

### **Character-defining elements**

#### **Site**

- The 60 ft. x 150 ft. property at 985 Duchess Avenue is part of what creates a great feeling of calm in the house. The natural setting is visible from every room. The site is very private.
- Three part site:
  - the long, steep slope rising up from Duchess Avenue covers the majority of the site
  - a flat area where the house nestles
  - and a small courtyard on the (north) side of house, backed by a short upper bank, above which is the carport and paved lane that residents typically use as their main access 'road'

- From Duchess, a stepped path winds up the sloping south-facing site to the rear of the property, where the house sits, tucked onto a small ‘pad’ with intimate pea-gravel courtyards on both sides of the house. Six pairs of French doors open onto the natural garden on all sides.
- Much of the site is planted with indigenous sword ferns, salal and Oregon grape. English ivy covers the bank at the lane side of the house. Mature trees include cedars, cypress, cottonwood, dogwoods, maples. Wisteria and climbing hydrangea drift against the house.
- An ivy-covered fence runs the length of the east side of the house, completely screening the neighbour’s house.

### **House – original 1954 section**

Features of ‘modern’ architecture found in the Boyd house:

- **Open plan.** Space flows from one area to the other—free of many of the usual partitions of typical 1950s houses—and to the outside. This inside-outside connection is particularly strong between the exterior and the living room, dining area, kitchen and circulation areas. The hallway steps down three steps into the living room. The only living room wall is a series of large floor to ceiling glass windows, overlooking onto a natural green garden.
- **Massive fireplace.** The symbolic ‘heart of the house’ big enough to roast a lamb—and visible from all areas of the open area—is cinder block, with a horizontal Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired 11-foot-wide concrete frieze (the client Bruce Boyd remembers helping build the form to cut expenses).
- **Use of continuous horizontal line of a cedar ‘band’ above door height.** This is the launching point for higher spaces shaped by the sloped underside of the roof
- **Strip windows.** A continuous horizontal band of windows runs throughout the house. Some windows are floor-to-ceiling sheets of glass used as exterior walls; others are casement windows or French doors.
- **All glass corner windows.** At all corners, adjacent panes of glass are butt-jointed and glued (instead of using a typical vertical mullion) to form seamless intersections.

- **Wide overhang of the cedar shake hip roof.** Provides both sun-shading and the chance to open doors or windows for ventilation even in rainy weather. Practically, the overhang provides weather protection to the wall below.

### **House – additions (1977) by John Keith-King Architects and Russell Hollingsworth**

- Skylights in main hallway, dining room and den that poured light into a house which even the original client found dark and moody at times [Russell Hollingsworth]
- Master bedroom extended, adding to the original L-shape
- Dining room wall moved internally to create two spaces: dining room and home office
- Kitchen renovation with small extension of wall between kitchen and living room

### **Views**

- View from entry, hall and living room: out into the adjacent green space and cedar trees, as well as view of Lions Gate Bridge and downtown Vancouver.
- View from kitchen: to Lions Gate Bridge, Vancouver, Mount Baker, Burnaby and North Vancouver.
- Sweeping 180 degree view from master bedroom: (east to west) from North Vancouver and this property’s own green space to ‘borrowed landscape’ of neighbouring Moul House– another peaceful, park-like green space with many mature deciduous trees and massive flowering shrubs such as rhododendrons.
- Views from home office and two bedrooms: onto lane-side ivy-covered bank and maple trees.

### **Quotes about the Boyd house, Ron Thom and West Coast style**

*“The joiner work is rough, the nail holes are all exposed, because they were doing it on a shoestring. But the form of the building is so beautiful, the finishing doesn’t even matter. This is just a great place to be in.”*

– *Russell Hollingsworth, architect, son of Fred Hollingsworth*

*“It looks like a work of art. And I think as a piece of sculpture it really is a piece of art.”*

– *Bruce Boyd, artist and original client*

*“Ron Thom is one of the only two architects Canada has ever spawned who design from the neck down. They have an Elizabethan mix of heart and mind.”*

*– Ned Pratt, architect, Thompson Berwick Pratt [where Ron apprenticed]*

*“Ron always tried to contain space, Arthur [Erickson] always tries to dissolve it. As a result, Ron’s houses are always snug and cozy while Erickson’s are elegant temples that force the client to adapt his life to the stern demands of architecture.”*

*–Doug Shadbolt, Director of Architecture, UBC*

*“It was exciting. We were doing little wee houses, mostly for people with no money—usually neighbours and art school graduates and staff. We just eliminated things. We’d leave the joists exposed in the ceiling and use cheap materials like cement blocks and concrete brick. Cedar was very cheap . . . Half our building had straight coloured concrete floors.”*

*– Fred Hollingsworth, architect*

*“It’s the principle of nature—how man is part of nature and relates to nature and has got to learn to live with nature. We were convinced it was the right approach to life and architecture. That’s why we spent so much time working at it.”*

*– Fred Hollingsworth, architect*

*“Ron was an artist who made a refined aesthetic out of unrefinement, a master of the difference between complexity and fussiness. He taught us to love raw surfaces and the natural, to recognize harmonious proportions, how good it is to sleep and eat close to the floor, to be wrapped in a cocoon of a dark room . . . how everything went together if you knew what you were doing.”*

*– Barbara Frum, CBC radio “As It Happens” host and Toronto client (Frum house)*

