Living With Ron Thom

The late, great architect designed my wee house in the forest back in 1954, for a moonlighter's fee of $100. His spirit still resides within its walls.

Ronnie, I never knew you. It was the third house the agent showed me that summer of 1972. We drove up the winding lane between Duchess and Esquimalt on West Vancouver's Sentinel Hill. "It looks like a cottage," she said, almost in apology, "but it's an early Ron Thom house." The name meant nothing to me, but I nodded solemnly, sensing respect.

The house was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was low, but not like British Property ranchers. It seemed contemporary, but I knew from the listing it had been built in 1954. And it seemed to belong there, growing out of the steep ivy and fern-covered slope. Later I would learn that Thom believed "a building has to make love to a site." The low, Japanese-style roof floated over the cedar-and-cement-block base. Glass met glass and corner windows vanished into the air.

I stepped through the grey French doors into a wonderful space. The ceiling rose to meet the pitched roofline. The hall flowed down three steps into an open living room and around the corner into the kitchen. Cedar and cement block flowed inside too. A fire burned in a great hearth, large enough to roast a lamb. A massive sculptural frieze wrapped around the 11-foot-wide fireplace. The house smelled of simmering garlic and the promise of happiness.

That spring of 1972, Watergate was heating up, the baseball season was starting and my world had just fallen apart. Dave's sudden death at 30 in an April avalanche wrenched me into a young widow's grief I had not known existed. And it left me the money to buy a house. Curiously, I found myself drawn closer to the mountains, where the house on Duchess waited.

Friends were puzzled when I followed the movers over Lions Gate Bridge from Kitsilano that fall. "Won't you be nervous, alone, in that house?" Nervous of what? The worst had happened. And I wasn't alone. Something of Dave still remained. Together we shared the house for almost a year. Then one night, reading by the fire, I realized he had gone. Just the house and I remained. Now, after 18 years, there is a new ghost, thanks to Alex.

Not so long ago, Alex Waterhouse-Hayward, a photographer friend, came to dinner and discovered I lived in a Ron Thom house. The next week he gave me a photograph of Thom he had taken two

By Kerry McPhedran

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX WATERHOUSE-HAYWARD KERRY MCPHEDRAN'S LOUIS FÉRAUD PANTSUIT AND BLOUSE COURTESY OF EXQUISITE BOUTIQUE, PARK ROYAL NORTH, WEST VANCOUVER

Opposite: Architect Ron Thom in 1984, two years before his death. Above: the writer in the front garden of her Thom house.

years before the architect died of a sudden heart attack early one November morning in 1986 at his Toronto desk. He was 61 when the photograph was taken.

The picture had a strange effect on me. I peered into the face and those penetrating eyes looked back. I examined the folded hands that had sketched the design for my house. I left the portrait in the envelope and put it away on a shelf. Yet I found myself drawn there occasionally, where I would smooth open the white envelope to gaze again at something disturbing and indiscernible in that face.

Alex began prodding me to write about Ron Thom. He was, after all, Canada's finest residential architect, many would argue, and I had the unique perspective of living in one of his houses. "But I never knew him," I resisted.

Ronald J. Thom was brilliant, charming, and in the right place for his time, although he didn't always know it. Frustration started at an early age. He should have been a concert pianist, according to his strict mother—Canada's second woman lawyer and a communist to boot. His Scottish-born father, an elementary school dropout, worked as a sheet metal worker and sang in the Vancouver Bach Choir. "I'll never forget the day I looked out the kitchen window and saw my girlfriend playing baseball with a whole bunch of boys," Thom told *Globe and Mail* architecture critic Adele Freedman in 1983. "Practicing piano didn't mean a damn thing to me."

Drawing and painting did, and when he came back from his World War II stint as an air force navigator, he enrolled at the Vancouver School of Art. Those were heady days. The concentrated mix of talented students and staff, including B.C. Binning, Jack Shadbolt, Gordon Smith, Don Jarvis, and Molly and Bruno Bobak, created one of B.C.'s richest artistic periods.

Thom was a natural painter. "He was the scholarship winner, the best in our class," remembers artist Gordon Smith. "He had that tremendous gift." Then one star-crossed night, Bert Binning invited Thom and Arthur Erickson to meet Richard Neutra, the great Viennese architect who had emigrated to the United States in 1923 to make contact with Frank Lloyd Wright. The world would never be the same again for Thom. The post-war architecture boom was on. Painting went the way of the piano.

Meanwhile, one of his boyhood friends had been following a similarly winding road to architecture and to the teachings of Frank Lloyd Wright. Fred Hollingsworth, with whom Thom would later develop a unique West Coast style, found inspiration for the design of his own North Vancouver home in Wright's famous Arizona desert house, Taliesen West. Hollingsworth was working as an apprentice for Thompson Berwick Pratt, Vancouver's leading architecture firm, the day Thom walked through the door looking for a job. Bingo. The two friends, eschewing the more accepted college route into architecture, apprenticed side by side for the next eight years at TBP, both obsessed by the potential of applying Wright's organic principles to the West Coast landscape.

Today Hollingsworth rolls his eyes at the thought of summing up Wright's theories in

"I had three kids and Ronnie had two or three by his first marriage, and we were each earning about $200 a month," recalls Fred Hollingsworth.

Above: Romping with son Robin, who now recalls his dad as "obsessed" with his work in the early years, moonlighting more for love than money. Below: a 1958 photograph of Thom, right, hanging on the words of his mentor, Viennese architect Richard Neutra, far left.

a sentence. "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. This is popular now, but in those days it wasn't. But we were convinced it was the right approach to life and architecture. That's why we spent so much time working at it."

The two apprentices were fascinated by Wright's way of applying Japan's formal discipline to indigenous materials. This novel approach offered Thom and Hollingsworth an enticing escape from the stale European tradition that dominated B.C. architecture up to that point. They traveled down the coast to see work done by like-minded architects: Bernard Maybeck, the Greene brothers, Richard Neutra, Pietro Belluschi and John Yeon. At night they listened to Beethoven, Bach and organic jazz.

But mostly they worked. Day and night. "I had three kids and Ronnie had two or three by his first marriage, and we were each earning about $200 a month," recalls Hollingsworth. To supplement their income, TBP agreed to let them design small houses at home after work. "In those days, we'd design a house for $100." Many of the 60-odd Ron Thom houses in Vancouver, dating from the '50s and '60s, were $100 midnight specials. Most are clustered in North and West Vancouver, but a few dot the Vancouver waterfront along Spanish Banks and Southwest Marine.

"It was exciting. We were doing little wee houses, mostly for people with no money—usually neighbors and art school graduates and staff. Most of the reason we got clients was because we were building at less cost than anybody else. 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 and so was clear hemlock. Half our buildings had straight colored concrete floors. That sort of approach. Every once in a while we'd get a little wealthier client, so things would change a bit."

"Ron had this obsession with hugging the ground," remembers Bruce Boyd,

Robin Thom, the first of Ron's six children from two marriages, listens to this with a smile. "They worked till midnight because they were obsessed! Dad worked until 3 a.m. most of his life. I remember one couple who wanted him to design a house. Dad said okay, but the only time I can meet with you is 3 a.m. They agreed. They met with him at 3 a.m., and they got a beautiful house. Later, Dad had the chance to make big money, but money wasn't what drove him."

Making good buildings drove him. "Thom at his best created humane architecture, exquisitely detailed," wrote Adele Freedman. And he loved the houses. Like all great artists, he didn't always get it right, but when he did, owners got a piece of

sculpture in which they could live.

My house is such a building. It is one of Thom's "little, wee houses," and it is named the Boyd House—after the client. The Bennett, Rogers and Forrest houses are all more splendid. My house is not even particularly well built, as Fred's son Russell Hollingsworth pointed out to me one evening as we talked about Thom. "The curious thing about these places is that the level of finish is so poor." He was gazing at my living room ceiling with the practiced eye of a designer/builder who grew up in the West Coast house style. He knew Ron Thom and has renovated a number of his houses. "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."

Vancouver architect Paul Merrick, who worked with Thom in Toronto and knows most of his houses, believes my house is one of the best of its kind. "It's good because it's simple, straightforward—almost utilitarian. That's such a beautiful thing."

My house is also "almost singularly the reason" Merrick became an architect. "I was a boy living over the hill when it was being built, and I used to come here with my father and a friend of Ron's to watch this wonderful space going up."

For all the accolades, the original owners, Joan and Bruce Boyd, sold the house after only three years. The Boyds' problem with the house was, they say, that they weren't involved enough in the design. Even though they had been fellow art school students with Thom, they stood in awe of his talent and basically let him experiment with their $12,000 budget. The result was too heavy for them: the cement block he used was not the same as the Arizona sandstone they had admired in the $80,000 Bennett house; the dark wood walls were too dark for the two painters to work in; and the roof overhang was too low.

"Ron had this obsession with hugging the ground," remembers Bruce Boyd. "He used to walk into a building and put his hand on top of his head and lift it up until it touched something. If the space above his head was too big, he didn't like it and he'd lower it. We used to have to go to the edge of the window and bend down to see what kind of a day it was. I think what really decided me to move was when I noticed our cat doing the same thing."

Those same overhangs were calculated to let the winter sun in and keep the house cool in summer—and they worked, says Boyd. "On a hot summer day, with all the French doors flung open, the house opens up like a desert tent. Fred and Ron were obsessed

who took these pictures of his newly completed West Vancouver house in 1954.

by Wright's Desert House, and here you can really tell what it must have felt like."

Now the Boyds look at photographs of the house they commissioned and wonder why they sold it. "It looks like a work of art. And I think as a piece of sculpture it really is a piece of art," says Bruce.

"Ron always tried to contain space, Arthur always tries to dissolve it," wrote Doug Shadbolt of Thom and Erickson.

Maybe that is why the house is equally fascinating upside down. In the winter, I lie on the sofa by the fire and my eyes drift across the soft, stained cedar to the angles and shadows. I know now that things that seem serendipitous are not. When I wake early on a clear winter morning, I pad out to the kitchen, knowing that one small window will frame the spectacular cone of Mount Baker, caught in the alpenglow. Did Ron face east on the lot one clear dawn, before the house was born, and marvel at that precise view? I believe so.

And I believe that although I am the third owner, and I simply stumbled upon the house, it was somehow meant for me. I find an explanation for this in UBC Director of Architecture Doug Shadbolt's simple analysis of the difference between the houses of Arthur Erickson and Ron Thom: "Ron always tried to contain space, Arthur 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."

When I first found this house, I needed that embrace: if not someone, then someplace to come home to. A year later, I cut down the big hedge of holly and firs to open up the garden. Punching skylights in the roof, I let light into the house and the world back into my life.

But what I missed by coming to the house late was the client education my next-door neighbors, Wally and Peggy Moult, went through. They also built themselves a Ron Thom house, a year after the Boyds did, and Peggy says she has

"never fallen out of love with it." They paid Thom $300 in fees for the design of their house plus the crash course in architecture that went along with it. Construction cost them $14,000. "We got introduced to the idea of apparent space right away," remembers Wally. "I was the grouch—I'd ask if we couldn't reduce the roof overhang by a foot to cut the costs." Thom explained to the young schoolteacher that there were two types of architects: engineers and artists. The overhang was calculated to keep the summer sun out of the windows. Thom held firm on other details and the Moults are happier for it.

A year before, on the site of my house, Bruce Boyd received a similar education. Boyd became what Thom called "the sponge." "Whenever it looked as if we were going over budget, I worked on the house myself, building things like the wooden frames for the cement frieze over the fireplace, to soak up the extra costs."

In the best of all worlds, Thom liked to design the furnishings too, right down to the ashtrays. He was allowed to go that far at Massey College, but generally he got only as far as advising the client on colors, wall finishes and furniture, which could be as simple as Chinese lanterns and rush matting.

As for my mix-and-match furniture, he would probably not approve—though Fred Hollingsworth tells me it doesn't hurt the building that much. "It just doesn't complete the picture." Which is part of the big difference between the three friends—Hollingsworth, Thom and Erickson—who have been called the holy trinity of West Coast residential architecture.

"The only reason I exclude Arthur from a closer relationship with us is he comes out of a different, elitist school that is more synthetic than organic," explains Hollingsworth. "His buildings have more of an 'elegentsia' quality, and it's a wonderful quality if you want to live that way. I maintain it doesn't suit life very well. If you leave things out of place in one of Arthur's rooms, it destroys the composition altogether."

Before writing this, I didn't know that people like Arthur Erickson had been here, in my house. Now, when I look up from washing dishes, I see a young Paul Merrick playing fort among the cedar trees when this was just a forested lot. I imagine Fred Hollingsworth wandering by to look at the progress of the construction. And I hear Joan and Bruce laughing as Thom and the other guests stumble down the hill, as my friends still do, after a "great drunken party."

But Thom couldn't resist the bigger party in Toronto. When he won the prestigious Massey College competition for the University of Toronto in 1960, he was at the pinnacle of his career. The Massey de-

sign was roundly applauded, later to be described by architecture critic Michael McMordie as "simply among the best buildings in Canada . . . a remarkable anticipation of new directions in architecture." This was the beginning of a period of praise and pain for Ron Thom.

By bringing West Coast design east, Thom "did something that changed the direction of Canadian architecture."

By the time Massey was completed in 1963, Thom had left TBP, settled permanently in Toronto and started his own firm, The Thom Partnership. He went on to do the superbly sculptural buildings at Peterborough's Trent University, the Shaw Festival Theatre, a design and master plan for the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo, as well as private homes, including that of Murray and Barbara Frum. By bringing the West Coast regional style to the east, Thom "did something that changed the direction of Canadian architecture," says architect Eberhard Zeidler.

"Until Arthur Erickson arrived on the scene," echoes Toronto architect and critic George Baird, "Ron was the pivotal representative of the West Coast in Canada." Although Ron Thom never became a household name in the way Arthur Erickson did, Thom's brilliance as a designer remains unquestioned.

Murray Beynon, a partner in his Toronto firm, described Thom before his death as "the most natural designer I've ever seen. It comes so easily, so fast. He always asks the common sense questions. He gets those straight and looks for the order and logic in them. He doesn't look at things in a tremendously complex way. Because he's so comfortable in the artistic sense, he doesn't feel he has to focus on that."

Ned Pratt called him 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. I'm sick to death of architecture from the neck up." The other, according to Pratt, was Paul Merrick.

LIVING WITH RON THOM

But neck-down architecture was tough for Thom to sustain in Toronto, with the demands of running a large practice seriously cutting into his time at the drawing board. He also experienced frustration with increasing bureaucratic controls. "With this fact of life comes the separation of the artist/architect and the client/clients, the weakening of the direct connection, the weakening of the precious exchange: request and reaction," he wrote in *The Canadian Architect* in the late '70s.

Russell Hollingsworth looks back to the '50s when, as a kid of seven, he watched Thom at his drawing table in a little house in Lynn Valley. "He was happy then, maybe the happiest he ever was." Russell thinks some of Thom's later anguish arose from the loss of control over design that inevitably comes with a big firm. "When you hand drawings off to people to do it for you, you give up something, and that's the frustration Ron felt. You can't do a really great house and hand it off to somebody. You've got to spend a lot of time on the drawing board. A good building invents new details."

The problem ran deeper than that. "Ron was a man in very considerable pain. I think that's why he drank," says Paul Merrick. "He had peculiar preoccupations like always wanting to be accredited by and accepted by the establishment. Ron got the Order of Canada for God's sake, but he never graduated from university and he always felt a lack for not having done that."

Journalist and loyal client Barbara Frum recalled after his death, "He could never accept the fact that he never had the right certificates. He always thought he was a fraud."

Merrick saw Thom the week before he died in November, 1986. "In his last days he wondered if anybody on this earth cared about him. And there were 700 people at his funeral."

Thom was in Vancouver that week, and he told Merrick he wanted to move back to the coast. "He didn't want to get into the practice, he just wanted a desk where he could work in the background. And that's what we were structuring. . . . In some ways, he was a lamb trying to live in lion's clothing. Anybody who knew him at all well always said, when the hell are you coming back to the rain forest? In his nature and spirit he was a West Coast person, and yet he subjected himself to Toronto and big government and big business. He felt unless he could command that kind of arena, he wasn't successful as an artist."

Ron Thom came back to the coast. His family and friends scattered his ashes in the Pacific near Lighthouse Park in

West Vancouver.

I like to think of a happier day back in the '50s, and a different body of water. Fred Hollingsworth and Thom were studying for their architectural exams after eight years of apprenticing at Thompson Berwick Pratt. "Ronnie phoned and said 'I'll pick you up in the morning,'" remembers Hollingsworth. "' Fine,' I said, 'but Ron, please be on time. I don't want to be driving out there late, worrying about a design problem I haven't seen yet.' He didn't come early. Going down Capilano Road he starts to tell me an Indian legend. I said, 'Ronnie, I really can't worry about Indian legend this morning.' 'Well,' he said, 'we've got to stop on the way at Beaver Lake in Stanley Park and dip our hands in the lake above our wrists. If we do, we'll pass.' I said that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. But we went. It's kind of marshy and muddy on the edge. Ronnie said kneel down, and I said no, I don't want to get my pants dirty. So we're both standing at the edge, leaning over, trying to get our wrists in the water, and we both fall in. He laughed like crazy. He said, 'Jeez we can't fail now! We've got our feet in the water, too!'"

Fred laughs. "Ronnie was a charming guy. A wonderful, wonderful guy. No one who met Ron Thom ever forgot him."

A decade ago, while beachcombing on Erwin Drive, I stumbled onto a waterfront Ron Thom house. I knocked on the door and asked if they would ever sell. "Oh, no," they said laughing, "but come in and have tea and look at the house." Yesterday I learned they were still there. I called and asked why they have stayed happily in their house for 30 years. Without hesitation, Scipio Merler answered, "It's home. Ron Thom designed a home for us."

I have come close to leaving my home only once, but fate turned and I stayed. I know it is only a building, and if there comes reason to, I will pass the house on again, as it was passed to me. In the meantime, I am content. Thom's portrait is framed now. What was once disturbing and indiscernible is gone in that face. And each time I return home and walk through the front door into the house that Ron built, in some inexplicable way, perhaps only for a moment, I am at peace.

In an interview three years before his death, Ron Thom said, "You know what makes me happy? You work through something with somebody—say, their house—and really, it's just like you were born together or something. They still live in what you did for them, and they're still happy. They never forget you."

Even the ones who never knew you, Ron. □