

# Victoria's Modernist Architectural Heritage



# Victoria's Modernist Architectural Heritage

## SITUATION BRIEF # 59

**Contributors: M. Segger, H. Yeganeh**

*This an abstract from the monograph, "Conservation Guidelines for Modernist Architecture in the Victoria Region" (Segger, M, U.Vic. Legacy Art Gallery ISBN 978-0-96803034-1-2, 2019). Given the paucity of published material on the topic it has been published here in its entirety.*

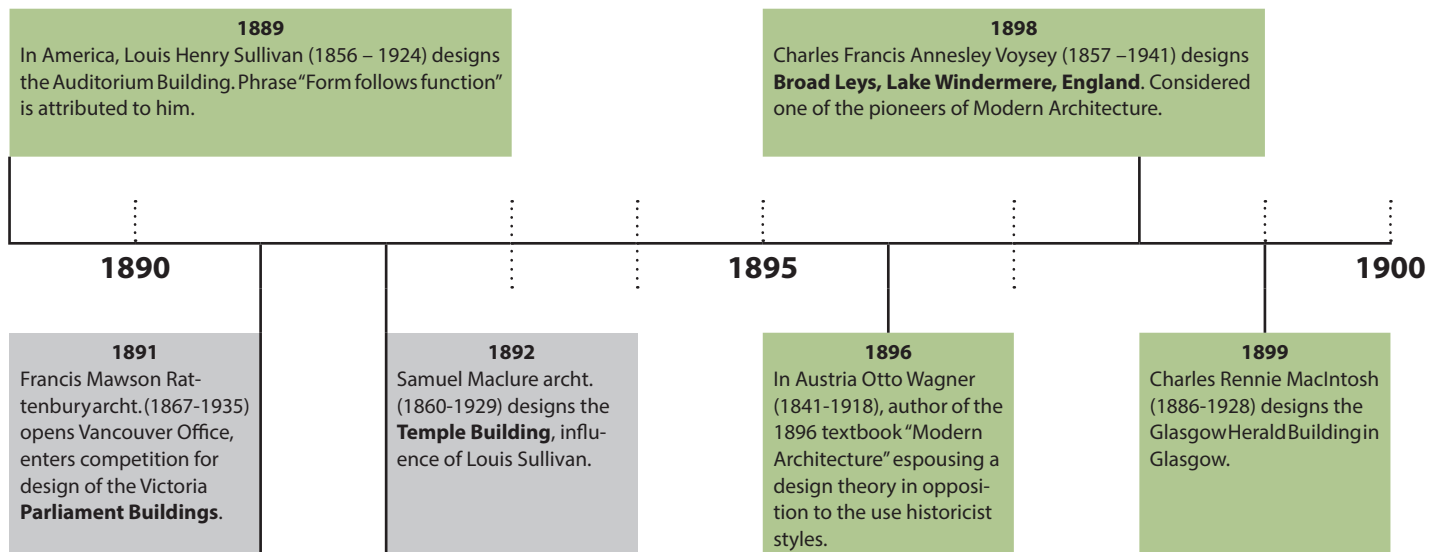
The DNA of architectural Modernism is rooted in the artistic Secessionist Movement of Vienna in the 1890s. The Secessionists, part of a new wave of liberal intellectuals, found inspiration in the flowering of the rationalist enlightenment in the arts, sciences and politics flooding across Europe at the time. They rallied to abandon the entrenched artistic establishments, the stifling constraints of bourgeois patronage, and along with it the creative strait-jacket of history and tradition. Founding members were artist Gustaf Klimt (1862-1918) and architect Otto Wagner. Wagner published his seminal textbook *Modern Architecture* in 1896. Architect and colleague Adolph Loos released his even more radical polemic *Ornament and Crime* in 1910. So began the search for a reimagined vocabulary of built-form liberated from stylistic references to past "dead" cultures and the search for a new rationalist approach to designing building types and forms expressive of the

this new spirit of freedom, individualism and democracy. As Loos proclaimed, ornament "belonged to primitive pre-modern man".

This new spirit soon found its expression in Art Deco, where decoration was reduced to mere surface ornamentation, abstracted from its historical or cultural roots. Art Deco, so named after the most extravagant celebration of the style at the *Paris Exposition internationale des arts decorative et industriels Modernes* in 1925. The style peaked in popularity when applied lavishly at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. Deco marks the Victoria landscape in buildings such as the British Columbia Electric Bay Street Substation (Theo Korner archt. 1928) and the Atlas Theatre (E. C. Clarkson archt. 1936).



Bay Street Substation, proposal drawing, 1928. Credit Victoria City Archives



The *Staatliches Bauhaus* emerged in Weimer, Germany, in 1919 as a school dedicated to training in all the design craft skills. Principal Walter Gropius had trained under Peter Behrens (1868-1940), noted for his highly functionalist factory designs. Other students were Paul Jenerette (Le Corbusier) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The radically *Functionalist* abstract style, a response to the “machine age” of mass manufacture, rooted its designs directly in the expressive use of space, and industrial materials such as concrete, glass and steel. A late Victoria expression of these industrial influences was Victoria’s Memorial Arena (Savage, Frame and James archts. 1948). Aerodynamic design for speed - airplanes and locomotives - inspired the almost totally stripped-down curvilinear forms of *Moderne*. *Streamlined Moderne* became the style of preference for airport terminals world-wide, as well as the ubiquitous roadside “diner” across North America. Numerous Victoria examples include the Bay Street B.C. Electric Substation (Theo Koerner archt. 1928) Inner Harbour Imperial Oil Gas

Station (Townley & Matheson archts. 1931), the Dr. T.H. Johns House (P.L. James archt. 1943) and the Odeon Theatre (H. H. Simmonds archt. 1947).

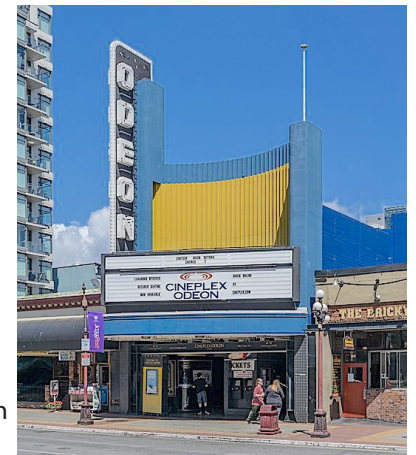
Ultimately, however, the search for a Modernist aesthetic vocabulary lies in its links to wider visual arts movements, in particular the Paris centred, but equally anti-establishment theoretical constructs of *Abstract*



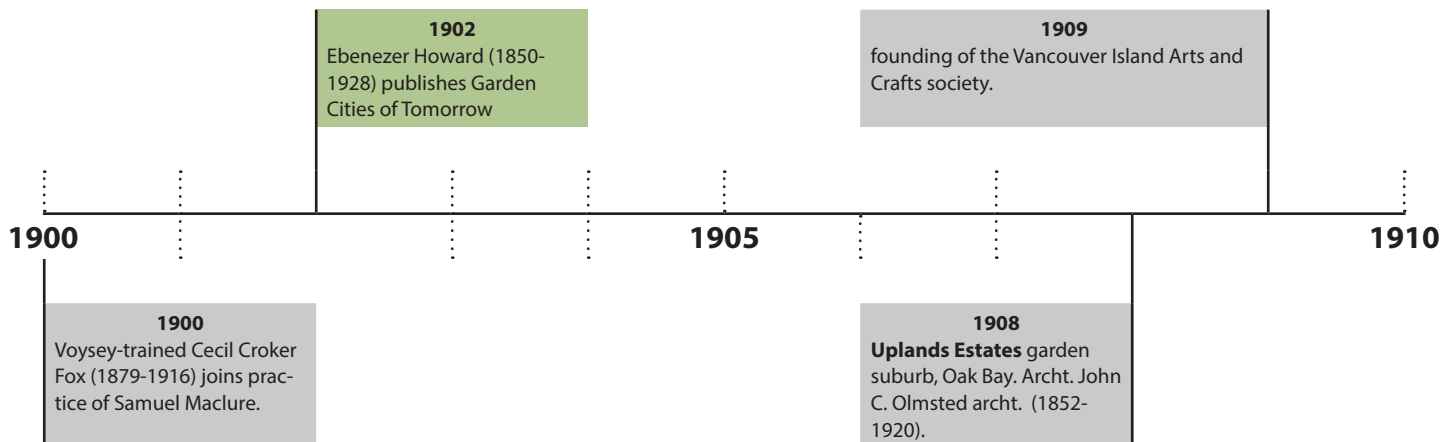
Imperial Oil Gas Station 1931. Credit: Victoria City Archives



Memorial Arena 1948. John Taylor photo 2019



Odeon Theatre 1947. John Taylor photo 2019



*Expressionism*. The work of George Braque (1882-1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) as they moved into *Cubism*, or the sculptural constructivists such as Russian but Bauhaus based Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), prompted the belief that through the manipulation of form, line and colour one could participate in a universal aesthetic language subject only to personal expression. This would bridge all ages, languages and cultures: an “*International Style*”. These ideas underpinned Le Corbusier’s 1921 manifesto *Toward a New Architecture*, then formalized in the 1928 meeting, *Congres Internationale d’architecture modern*, (CIAM) he organized in Switzerland.

Shortly afterwards, the rise of anti-semitism and purge of socialists under the Third Reich dispersed an entire generation of European intellectuals. The Bauhaus closed in 1933, its faculty scattered mainly to Britain and the United States. By the mid-1930s International Modernism was well ensconced in the United States, its practitioners leading some of the most influential schools of architecture.

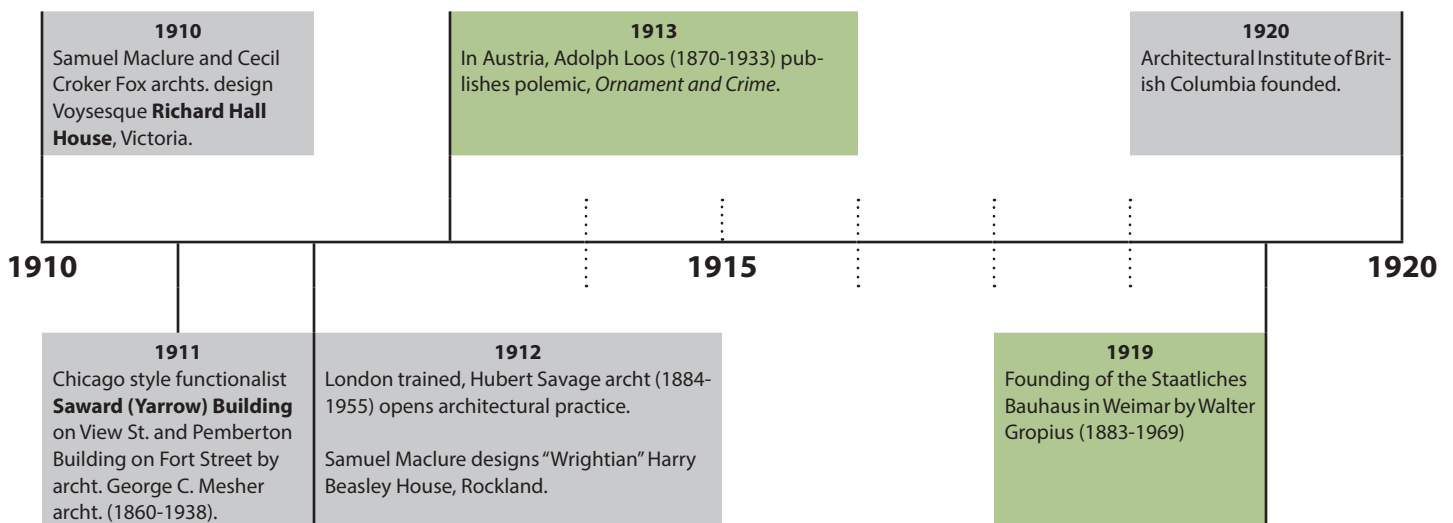
The well-springs of Modernism in North America were slightly different. Sharing the same enlightenment beliefs in rationalism and democracy, American architects sought liberation from the encumbrances of “Old World” traditions, in favour of a New World idealism. At first expressed in the *Arts-and-Crafts* aesthetic based on local materials and colonial building traditions what emerged was a new pragmatic environmental functionalism underpinned by belief in the liberating promises of technology. This contrasted with the European attempts to identify the style with Marxist Socialism in Germany,



Temple Building 1892. Martin Segger photo 2019

Russia and Holland on the one hand, and state-endorsed fascist corporatism in Italy. Here eastern American *Shingle Style* found early Victoria converts in the domestic architecture of Samuel Maclure and Francis Mawson Rattenbury. The influential “Chicago School” of architects applied these ideas to larger scale urban landscape. Louis Sullivan (1856-1924), famous for coining the phrase, “form follows function”. He espoused an “organic design”, where materials, form (often symbolic) and abstract decoration are rooted in a sense of place and homage to nature. Samuel Maclure’s Temple Building (1892) on Fort Street well illustrated the “Sullivan-esque”. The seminal figure in American Modernism was Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) who inherited the Functionalist banner from Sullivan.

Wright, both in his writings and prolific practice gave America a new design vocabulary based on the



specificities of use, site, and materials. Samuel Maclure’s H. Beasley House (1913) in Rockland directly demonstrates his interest in Wright’s suburban house types. However, Victoria would have to await the post war practice of John DiCasteri to witness Wright’s “Prairie School” influence demonstrated in projects such as the Uplands’ Achtem House (1965) and in commercial work, such as the CNIB Building on Blanshard Street (1951).

British Modernism, similar to American, was Arts-and-Crafts based, generated from the late 19th C. architects and designers such as William Morris, C. F. A. Voysey, C. R. Macintosh and the profoundly influential Glasgow School of Art. In the colonies, British influence was exported, as a spare classicism via the large- scale institutional projects undertaken by practices such as Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944). Maclure brought in an English partner to his Victoria practice, Cecil Croker Fox, who had



Richard Hall House 1910 Martin Segger photo 2019

articled with Voysey. The cottage architecture of Voysey, distinguished by its spare use of detailing, emphasis on the roof, and simplicity of form, prevailed in Victoria during the interwar years through numerous practitioners including Hubert Savage (1884-1955), Ross Lort (1889-1968) and the James brothers, Douglas (1888-1962) and Percy Leonard (1878-1978). The Maclure/Fox designed Richard Hall House (1910) in Fairfield is almost pure Voysey.

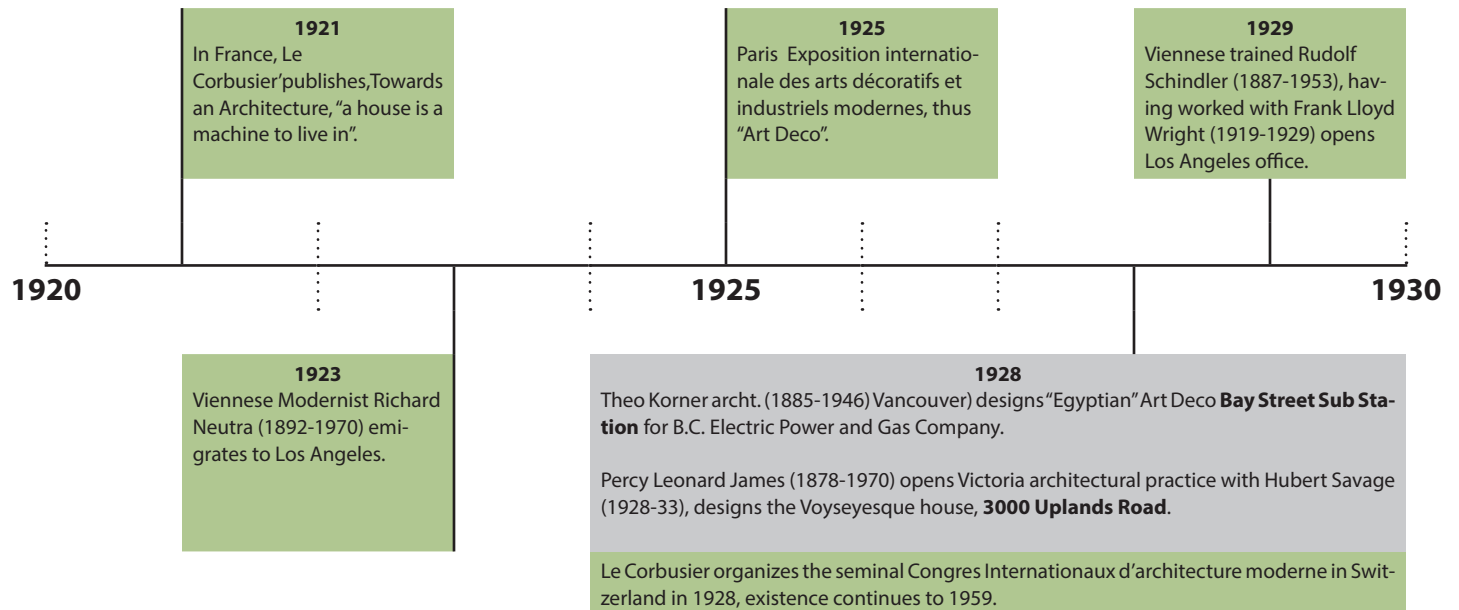
### The “isms” of Modernism

The critical literature of Modernism quickly fractionalizes into a plethora of “isms”, each with its own etymological ancestry. However, reading a building through this lens helps understand what a designer is trying to do as it helps define the design vocabulary being applied.



Harry Beasley House 1913 Martin Segger photo 2019

**Functionalism** provides an over-arching design



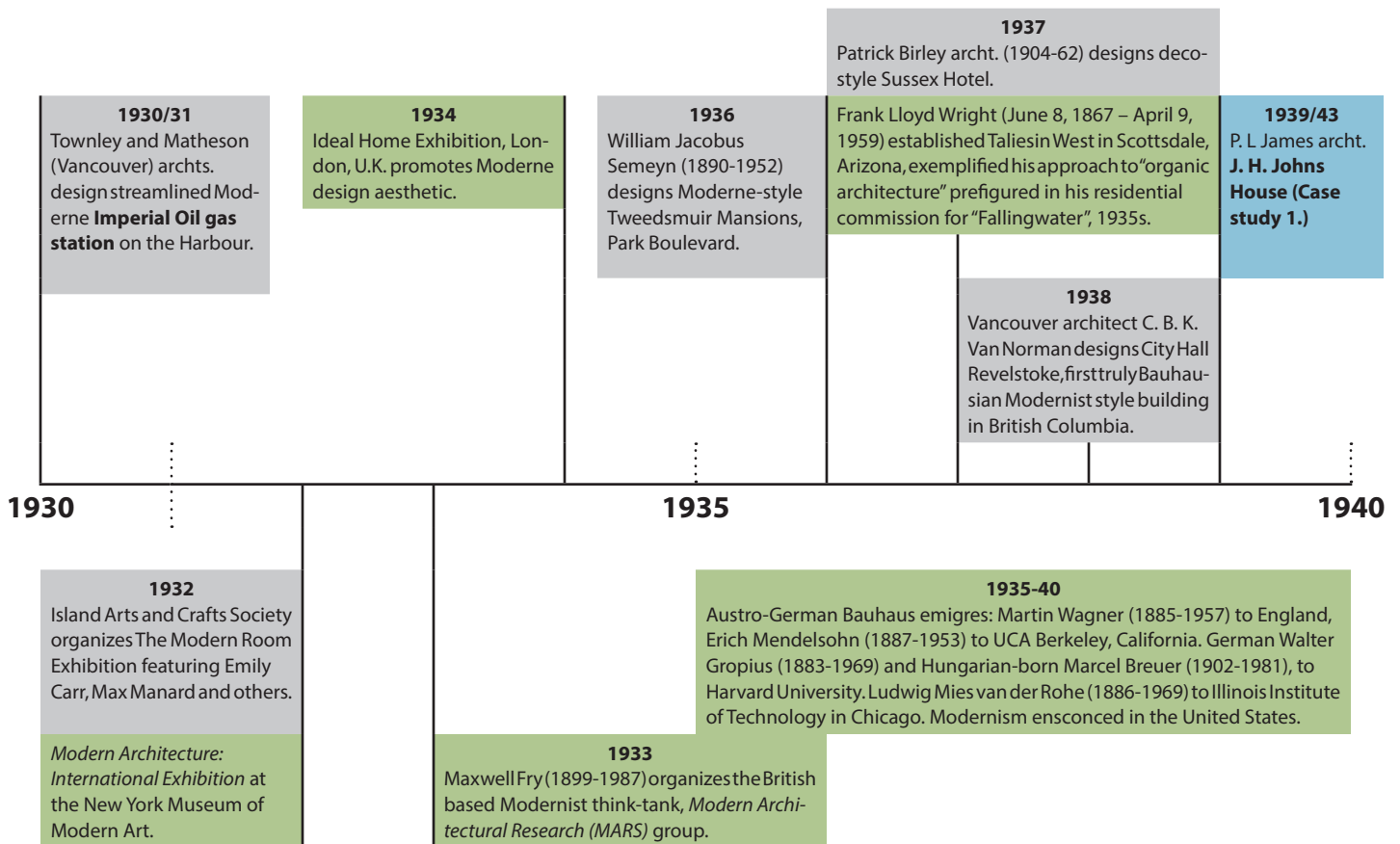
rationale that all building components from form to finish to materials must express patterns of use, engineering principles utilized, and the construction elements used. Ultimately **Functionalist** - so also 'economically efficient' - the style lent itself easily to the mass production of its building parts and construction systems. Summing this up, the term **Progressive** became synonymous with the **International Style** during the period that the New York magazine *Progressive Architecture* (1945-1995) reigned as an influential proponent of the style and its practitioners. The over-arching term "**International Style**" was actually applied retroactively by Americans academic Henry-Russell Hitchcock (1903-1987) and architect Philip Johnson (1906-2005) in their co-curated 1932 exhibition *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at the New York Museum of Modern Art. Featuring the work of Europeans Marcel Brauer, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, along-side American emigres Richard Neutra and Alvar Aalto, critical elements of the style observable in the projects on display included rectilinear forms, plain unornamented surfaces, open interiors, gravity-defying cantilever construction. Glass, steel and less visible reinforced concrete were the characteristic construction materials. Fabricated composites allowed for the creation of distinctive forms

such as umbrella shells, waffle slabs and folded plates. The British Columbia Electric (T.B.P. archts. 1954) building on Pandora and the Bentall Building (Frank Musson archt. 1963) on Douglas Streets in Victoria lie solidly within this refined geometric design tradition.

**Formalism** (or **New Formalism**) emerged in the United States during the mid 1950s 1960s in response to the pure abstraction of the International Style. Abstracted classical elements including symmetrical elevations,



Bentall Building 1963. John Taylor photo 2019





Dominion Post Office 1945/52. Martin Segger photo 2019

columns, highly stylized entablatures and colonnades were consciously utilized. The style was favoured for particularly for high-profile cultural, institutional and civic buildings. They were typically constructed using rich materials such as marble and polished granite. Victoria's Dominion Post Office Building (James & James archts. 1948/52) on Government Street is an example.

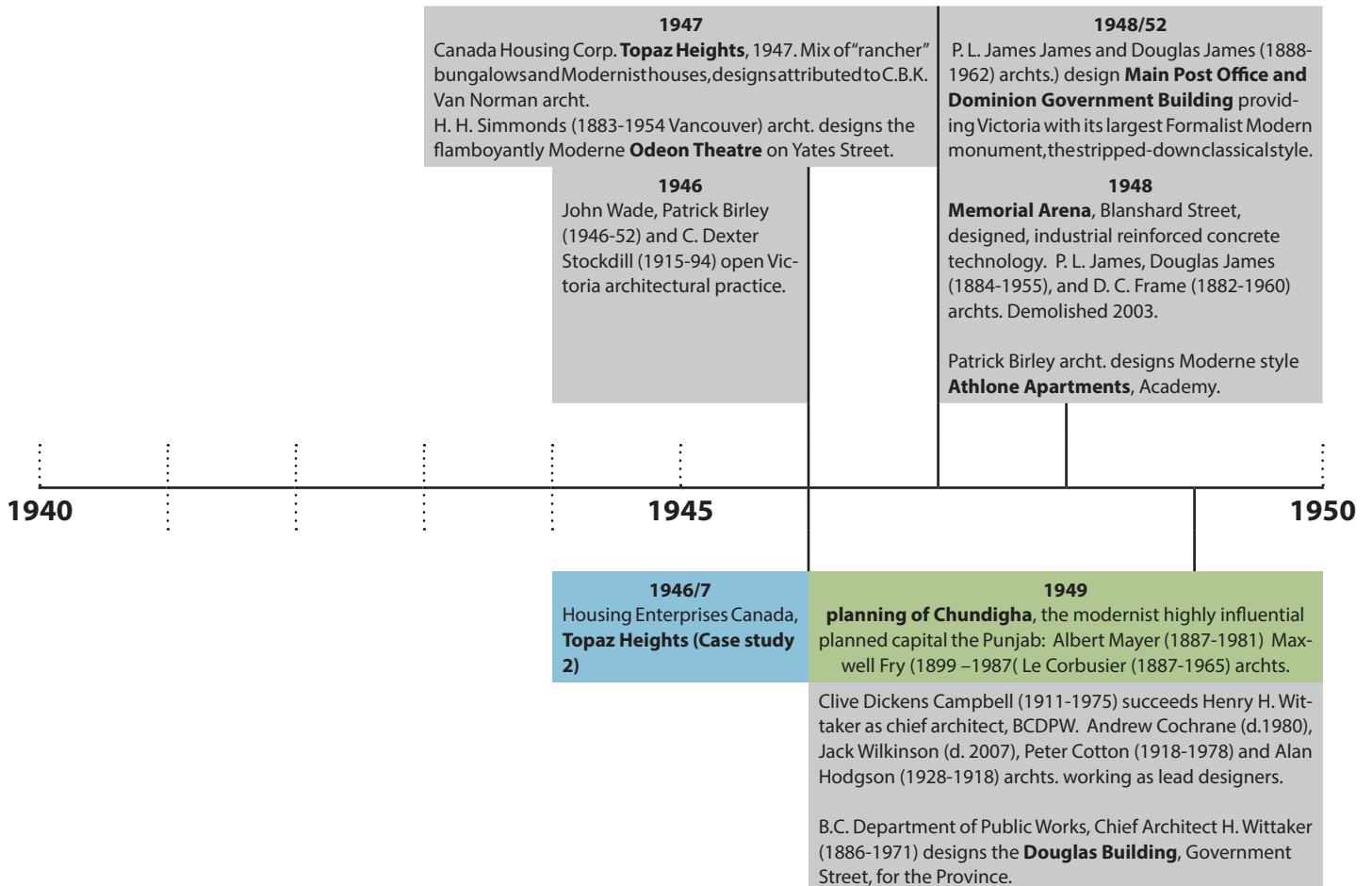
**Structuralism** in architecture and town planning referenced the French linguistic anthropologist Claude

Levi-Strauss' (1908-2009) belief that an overarching system or structure underpins all cultural phenomena. This makes the language of abstract expression universally "readable"; so visible parts must express their relationships to the whole. This thinking underpinned a design approach that built on abstract aesthetic systems to drive form and detail, geometric grids and the proportional relationships of building elements.

**Brutalism** (from the French "brut" = "raw"),



Saanich Municipal Hall. Ca. 1965. Credit: Saanich Municipal Archives



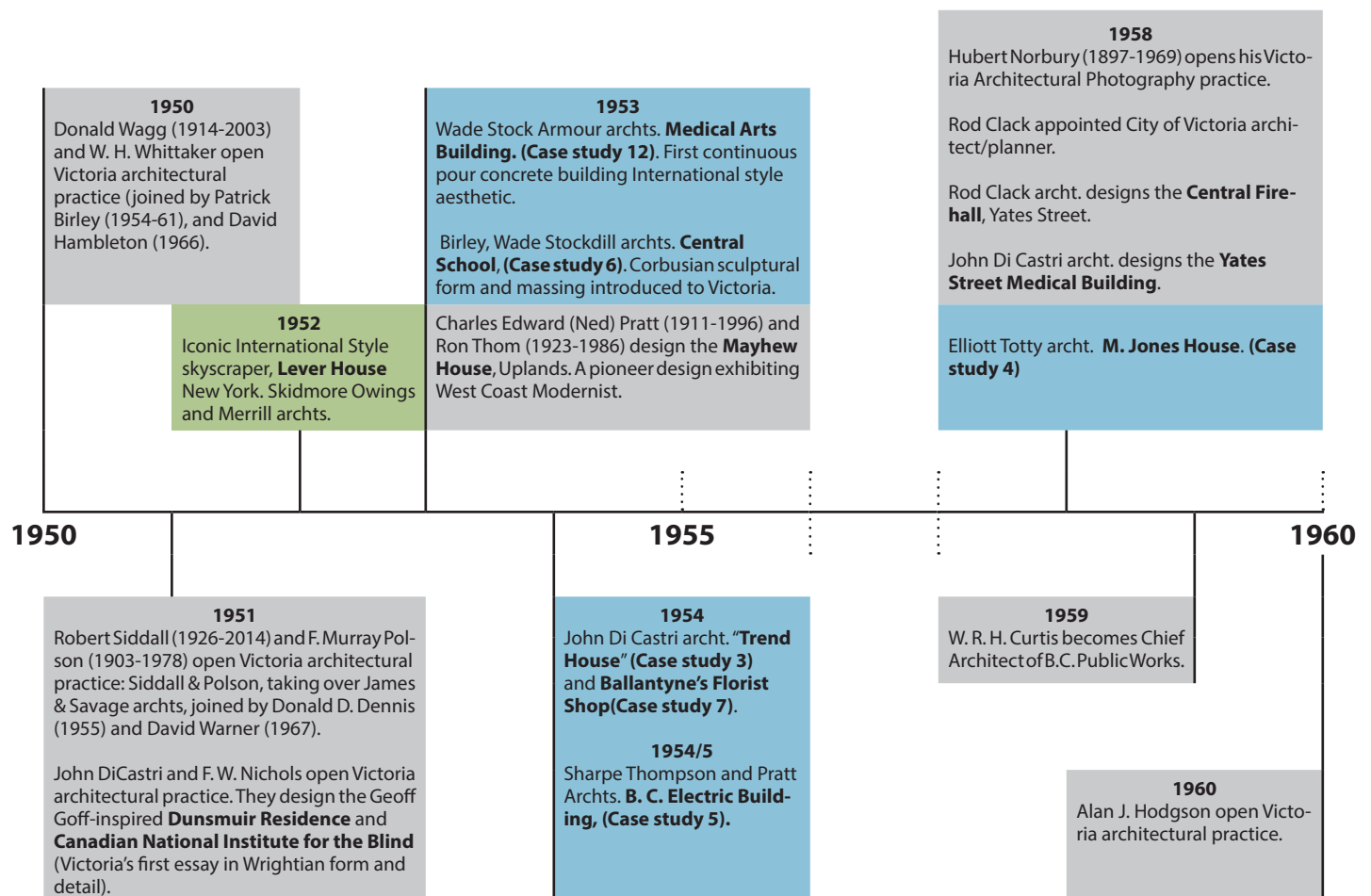
retroactively applied to Le Corbusier early work, was championed in Britain in the 1950s. Its scaled-up expressive forms came to be the preferred style for public institutional commissions such as universities, government buildings and public housing schemes. The style was bureaucratized as it aligned political socialism in Eastern-Block countries and many developing nations. Saanich Municipal Hall (Wade Stockdill Armour archts. 1965) is a local expressive essay in the style.

**Critical Regionalism** is another retroactively applied stylistic variant of Modernism. Its purpose was to critique the “placelessness” of International Style architecture in favour of a design approach which mediates between the global and the local, situating buildings within a geographical and cultural context. Critical Regionalism describes the design approach applied to the University of Victoria Gordon Head Campus in 1961 by San Francisco consulting architects Wurster Bernardi & Emmons archts.

## Victoria’s Post-war Modernist Landscape

While Victoria might be perceived as perilously inhabiting the geographical and cultural fringe of the western world, in fact its role as a provincial capital and hub linking communication and transportation networks on both an East/West and North/South axis put it well within the confluence of post WWII economic events and cultural influences. Victoria’s architects shared the idealism of their international colleagues: the vision of a new world-order of international peace and economic prosperity underpinned by equality and democracy.

The passage through Victoria of so many people associated with the armed forces no doubt formed the basis for Victoria’s attraction to demobilized soldiers after the War and the doubling of the City’s population in the 20 years between 1946 and 1966. Industrial growth in the British Columbia prompted the rapid expansion of services provided out of Victoria, from health and educational facilities to law courts. The B.C. Department of Public



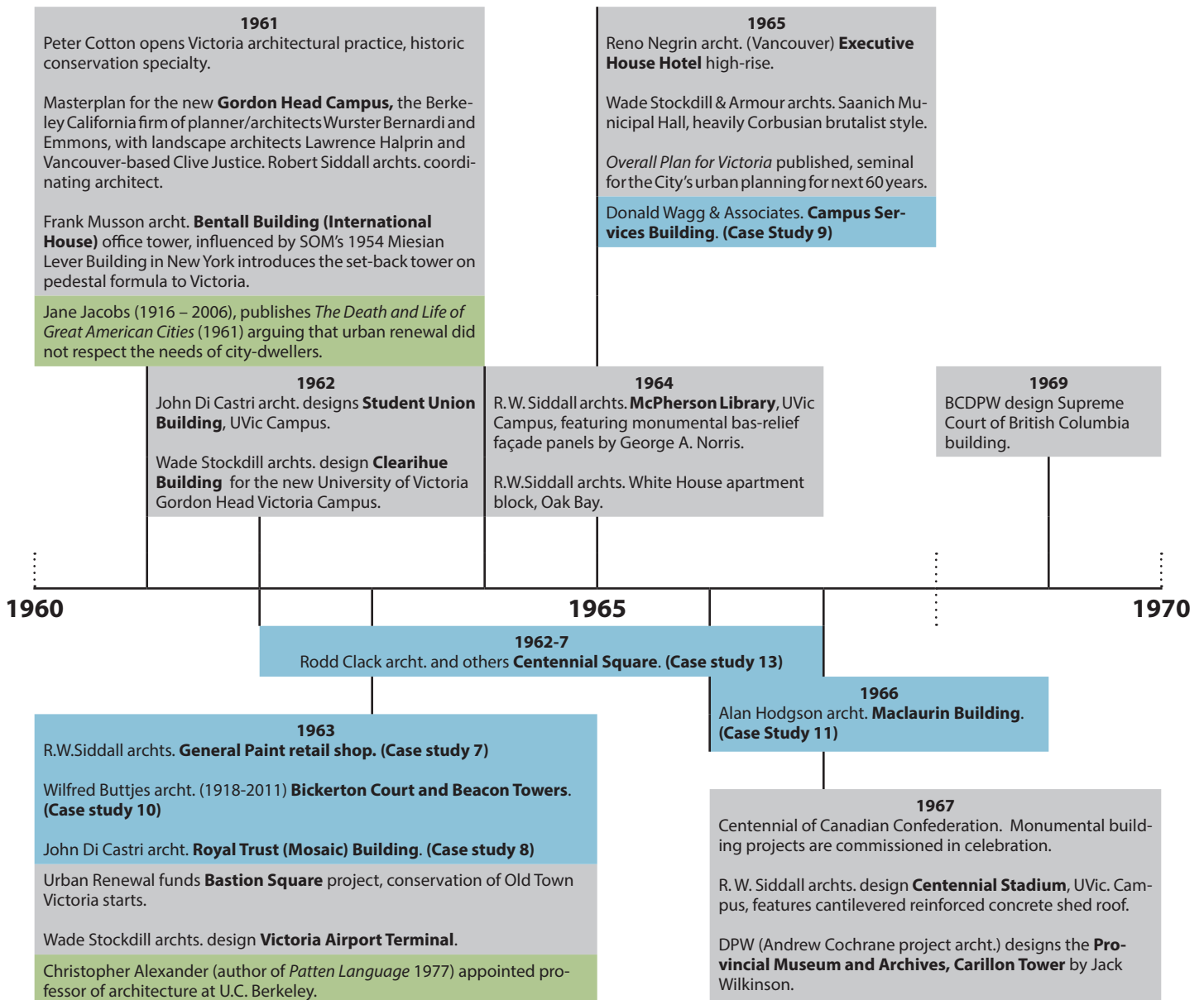


Works had a long history of serving the entire Province. DPW housed a large architectural office with some projects commissioned from private firms, a practice that intensified after WWII.

As local architectural practices expanded or were established to provide infrastructure for this growth, young architects and design professionals followed from across Canada, from the U.K., and some qualifying and moving out from Public Works. Wilfred Lougher-Goodey, Percy and Douglas James, John Wade, David Warner and David Hambleton articulated in London. Jack Wilkinson trained in Wales, Donald Wagg in Manchester, Frank Poulson in Paris; Robert Siddall, Andrew Cochrane, Peter Stockdill at the University of Manitoba; Alan Hodgson, Rodd Clack, Donald Dennis, Nick Bawlf and Peter Cotton were early graduates of the new UBC School of Architecture of Architecture.

Although trained in Public Works Di Castri studied under Wright's disciple Bruce Goff (1904- 1982) at the University of Oklahoma and then set off on an America-wide tour of Wright's buildings, including meeting the master at his Taliesin West studio in Arizona. Along with Di Castri, Hodgson, Cochrane, Cotton, Wilkinson started their careers in DPW.

The small bungalow subdivision, Topaz Heights (1946-1947), designed by the Central Housing & Mortgage Corporation and financed by Canadian Insurance Companies created a new standard for the modern suburban planning. Ultimately over 15 years this program added some 3,213 units to Victoria's housing stock. Slightly up-market, infill in Rockland, Fairfield and on the Landowne slopes, the ubiquitous Rancher became a popular form. It owed its origins to F. L. Wright's "Prairie



House". But a unique variant soon defined its own place in the mushrooming suburbs. One of the earliest examples of the domestic West Coast Modernist Style was an Uplands seafront house for local businessman Logan Mayhew designed by Charles Edward (Ned) Pratt (1911-1996) and Ron Thom (1923-1886).

The same team provided the City with its first major corporate example of the International Style, the B. C. Electric Building (Sharpe Thompson Berwick and Pratt Architects, 1954/5 and the first use of machine-made curtain-wall in the Province. Wrightian influence in the City's was expressed in architect JohnDi Castri's work, Ballantyne's Florist shop (1954) the Royal Trust building (1963) and his highly inventive Stucturalist-style "Trend House"(1954). The major private firms provided for a confluence for American, British, Canadian and local talent. British-trained Don Wagg joined ex-Public Works chief

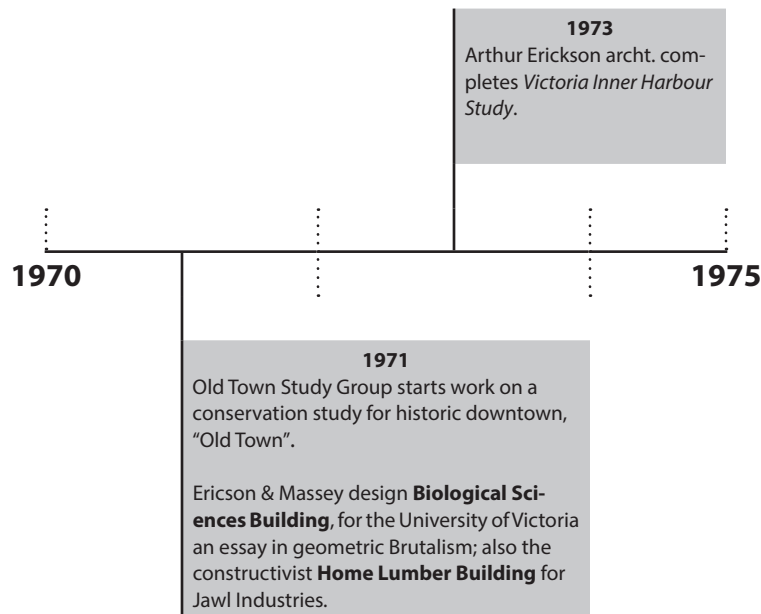


Logan Mayhew House 1950. Photo John Taylor 2017



Clearihue Building 1962. Presentation Drawing, Allan W. Edwards 1962. Credit: UVic. Special Collections

architect William Whittaker to produce severe International Style designs for hospital projects throughout the Province. Wagg was shortly joined by Brit, David Hambleton. Alan Hodgson and Victoria's first architect/planner, Rod Clack, were UBC alumni. John H. Wade, British educated, joined with Manitoba graduate Charles D. Stockdill in a practice that produced a full range of institutional, public and residential buildings. International Style projects included schools such as Central Secondary School (1953-1954) and the Clearihue Building (1962) for the new University of Victoria Campus, and the overtly Corbusian Brutalist-style Saanich Municipal Hall (1965). This cluster of firms had a profound influence on the City's Modern landscape. However, a relatively silent but pervasive influence was



Bastion Square 1963. Credit: Victoria City Archives ca.1965

the Berkeley California firm of planner/architects Wurster Bernardi and Emmons, with landscape architect Lawrence Halprin. Under the direction of local businessman William Biggerstaff Wilson, University Development Board Chair and later Victoria Mayor, this firm provided the Masterplan for the new Gordon Head Campus (1961) then later City's urban planning initiatives: Centennial Square (1962-1967), Bastion Square (1963) and the conservation of Old Town. Canadian, but Berkeley trained, landscape architect Clive Justice provided the ground plans for both the new Campus and Centennial Square. WB&E, committed Critical Regionists, insisted that the University commission local architects, applying their own philosophical and design solutions to the University's evolving needs. The buildings themselves were to be subservient to and linked by a garden landscape, an approach reflecting both minimalist thinking in California (particularly at UC Berkeley where Wurster was dean of the architecture school) and a Wrightian Organic approach, the philosophical and aesthetic precepts of the emerging West Coast Style. The conservation plan for Old Town, centering on the two squares, owed much to the mediated social planning theories of Jane Jacobs and Berkeley based Christopher Alexander rather than the rigorous scientific architectural conservation principles of the 1964 *Venice Charter (International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites)*.

The local University of Victoria consulting architect was Manatoban Robert Siddall whose practice was joined by Franklin Polson, who had trained and worked in



McPherson Library, University of Victoria, Credit: UVic. Special Collections

Paris, London, New York and Vancouver. Londoner David Warner and UBC graduate Donald Dennis would join the firm in the 1950s. Their work was heavily European influenced, from the studied Formalism of the University's MacPherson Library (1963-1974) to the more strident Brutalism exhibited in their Student Residential buildings (1969) executed under Arthur Erickson's brief reign as Campus Consulting Planner. Di Castri contributed Wrightian design solutions for his Student Union Building (1963) and Social Sciences Building (1966.) Alan Hodgson's Arts and Education Building (1966-1978) was a more Corbusier-inspired Brutalism softened via contemporary Scandinavian influences. It should be seen in contrast to nearby the Biological Sciences building, an essay in more expressive geometric Brutalism by Erickson and Massey (1971).

On a regional scale, probably the most profound influence on the built form of Greater Victoria from these years, and a lasting legacy to this day, was the Victoria Overall Plan (1965). Produced for the Greater Victoria Regional District but closely guided by Victoria Mayor R.B. Wilson and planner Rod Clack, this rationalized the region's growth. Defined by transportation corridors, densities were distributed. Victoria's down-town core was to be reinforced through its new public squares and the preservation of its historic "old town" supported by a ring of auto parkades. On the city's urban boundaries a "necklace" of shopping malls were intended to anchor the growing suburbs and capture the resulting retail trade to enrich the core City's coffers. Within 20 years the City had transitioned from a sedate Victorian/Edwardian townscape to a modern metropolis.



Student Union Building, University of Victoria, Credit: UVic. Special Collections

## Observations

- Victoria's Modernist architectural heritage, particularly that of rapid build-out years 1949-1969, has been under-appreciated. A heritage inventory update which included work of the Modernist movements was shelved by the City of Victoria in 2008. A full regional survey should be undertaken and significant buildings should be added to the heritage lists.
- Despite a rising contemporary general interest in Mid-Century Modern design and decorative arts the local building stock from the years 1920-1990 is under constant threat, and is being lost to new development. The critical 50-year use/renewal cycle of many buildings now constitutes a particular threat to buildings or their unique design elements from these years.
- An illustration of these pressures is the City of Victoria's plans to remove one of Victoria's iconic Modernist architectural design and public art monuments, the Centennial Fountain, anchoring the City's major urban public space of the same period.

## Resources

- Curtis, William J. R. *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. Phaidon, N.Y. 1996.
- Hitchcock, Henry Russell and Phillip Johnson. *The International Style*. Norton, N.Y. 1932.
- Jenks, Charles. *Modern Movements in Architecture*. Penguin, London, 1985.
- Luxton, Donald. *Building the West: The Early Architects of British Columbia*. Vancouver: Talon Books, Vancouver, 2003.
- Luxton, Donald. *Capital Regional District Art Deco and Moderne*. Victoria: Hallmark Society, 1984.
- Luxton, Donald. "Modernism in Victoria," in *The Victoria Heritage Registry Update*, City of Victoria, 1996.
- Segger, Martin. *Victoria Modern 3, UVic and the Victoria Regional Aesthetic in the Late 50s and 60s*. Victoria: University of Victoria. 2011.
- Segger, Martin. *Conservation Guidelines for Modernist Architecture in the Victoria Region*. U.Vic. Legacy Art Gallery ISBN 978-0-96803034-1-2, 2019)

Liscombe, Rhodri Windsor, and Michelangelo Sabatino. *Canada : Modern Architectures in History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2016.